SHORT STORIES

No. 798. Week Ending April 16, 1904 Price One Penny.

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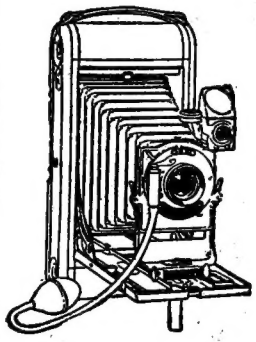

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SHORT STORIES

No. 798.] Week Ending April 16th, 1904. [One Penny.

THIS SPLENDID NEW SERIAL HAS JUST BEGUN.

A Story of Love and Crime.

By ARNOLD BENNETT.

Synopsis of First Chapters.

Mr. Theodore Racksole, American multi-millionaire, accompanied by his daughter Nella, arrives at the Grand Babylon Hotel. At dinner he orders Jules, the dignified head-waiter, to bring him a steak and a bottle of Bass.

Jules is annoyed at this strange order, and refuses to carry out the millionaire's instructions.

Calmly, without a word of expostulation, Racksole seeks out Félix Babylon, the proprietor of the hotel, and in less than twenty minutes contracts have been signed between the two parties, by which it is transferred to Racksole for the sum of £400,000.

The millionaire then orders the *chef*, Rocco, to cook him a steak, and to see that it is served, with a bottle of Bass, by Jules at their table in the dining-room.

When Racksole returns to his daughter, he finds that with her is a Mr. Reginald Dimmock, English companion to Prince Aribert of Posen. As Jules is serving the steak, Racksole sees him give a significant, ominous wink to this Dimmock. In the course of conversation, the latter says that his master is on the point of coming to the hotel.

Racksole stays talking very late that night to Mr. Babylon, and as he is making his way to his room in the small hours of the morning, he sees Jules emerging from Room 111—Nella Racksole's! What can it mean? Ten silent strides, and the millionaire, revolver in hand, is upon him.

By force, Racksole makes Jules return with him to Room 111. On opening the door, they find therein not Nella, but Dimmock!

The latter explains how the window of the room had been broken by a stone flung from the outside, and how, in order to save Miss Racksole from the discomfort occasioned thereby, he had volunteered to exchange rooms with her. The millionaire accepts the explanation, although the circumstances of the case worry him considerably.

Miss Spencer, the hotel clerk, is found to have left the hotel during the night in a very mysterious manner.

Racksole summons Jules, and, in a few words, during which he learns that the waiter has saved £20,000, dismisses him, forbidding him to enter the hotel again.

Prince Aribert arrives at the hotel and is received by Nella, who recognises him as the "Count Steenbock" she had met the previous Spring in Paris. He tells her that he is in London on important business, connected with his nephew, Prince Eugen, the reigning Duke of Posen, who is to follow him to the Grand Babylon immediately.

As they are talking Mr. Racksole and two men come into the room, carrying on a stretcher the dead body of Reginald Dimmock!

At the hotel that night is given a great ball by a Mr. and Mrs. Sampson Levj. In a little secret balcony, known only to the hotel authorities, from which the whole of the ball-room can be surveyed, Racksole finds Jules!

In the morning the millionaire is informed that during the night Dimmock's body has completely disappeared!

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THIS WEEK'S INSTALMENT.

SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Nella and the Prince.

It appeared impossible to Theodore Racksole that so cumbrous an article as a dead body could be removed out of his hotel, with no trace, no hint, no clue as to the time or the manner of the performance of the deed. After the first feeling of surprise, Racksole grew coldly and severely angry. He had a mind to dismiss the entire staff of the hotel. He personally examined the night-watchmen, the chambermaids, and all other persons who by chance might or ought to know something of the affair; but without avail. The body of Reginald Dimmock had vanished utterly—disappeared like a fleshless spirit.

Of course there were the police. But Theodore Racksole held the police in sorry esteem. He acquainted them with the facts, answered their queries with a patient weariness, and expected nothing whatever from that quarter. He also had several interviews with Prince Aribert of Posen, but though the Prince was suavity itself, and beyond doubt genuinely concerned about the fate of his dead attendant, yet it seemed to Racksole that he was keeping something back, that he hesitated to say all he knew.

Racksole, with characteristic insight, decided that the death of Reginald Dimmock was only a minor event, which had occurred, as it were, on the fringe of some far more profound mystery. And, therefore, he decided to wait, with his eyes very wide open, until something else happened that would throw light on the business. At the moment he took only one measure—he arranged that the theft of Dimmock's body should not appear in the newspapers.

It is astonishing how well a secret can be kept, when the possessors of the secret are handled with the proper mixture of firmness and persuasion. Racksole managed this very neatly. It was a complicated job, and his success in it rather pleased him.

At the same time he was conscious of being temporarily worsted by an unknown group of schemers, in which he felt convinced that Jules was an important item. He could scarcely look Nella in the eyes. The girl had evidently expected him to unmask this conspiracy at once, with a single stroke of the millionaire's magic wand. She was thoroughly accustomed, in the land of her birth, to seeing him achieve impossible feats. Over there he was a "boss"; men trembled before his name; when he wished a thing to happen—well, it happened; if he desired to know a thing, he just knew it. But here, in London, Theodore Racksole was not quite the same Theodore Racksole. He dominated New York, but London, for the most part, seemed not to take much interest in him; and there were certainly various persons in London who were capable of snapping their fingers at him—at Theodore Racksole! Neither he nor his daughter could get used to that fact.

As for Nella, she concerned herself for a little with the ordinary business of the bureau, and watched the incomings and outgoings of Prince Aribert with a kindly interest. She perceived what her father had failed to perceive, that his Highness had assumed an attitude of reserve merely to hide the secret distraction and dismay which consumed him. She saw that the poor fellow had no settled plan in his head, and that he was troubled by something which, so far, he had confided to nobody. It came to her knowledge that each morning he walked to and fro on the Victoria Embankment, alone, and apparently with no object. On the third morning she decided that driving exercise on the Embankment would be good for her health, and thereupon ordered a carriage and issued forth, arrayed in a miraculous, putty-coloured gown. Near Blackfriars Bridge she met the Prince, and the carriage was drawn up by the pavement.

"Good-morning, Prince," she greeted him. "Are you mistaking this for Hyde Park?"

He bowed and smiled.

"I usually walk here in the mornings," he said.

"You surprise me," she returned. "I thought I was the only person in London who preferred the Embankment, with this view of the river, to the dustiness of Hyde Park. I can't imagine how it is that London will never take exercise anywhere except in that ridiculous Park. Now, if they had Central Park——"

"I think the Embankment is the finest spot in all London," he said.

She leant a little out of the landau, bringing her face nearer to his.

"I do believe we are kindred spirits, you and I," she murmured; and then: "*Au revoir*, Prince!"

"One moment, Miss Racksole." His quick tones had a note of intreaty.

"I am in a hurry," she fibbed; "I am not merely taking exercise this morning. You have no idea how busy we are."

"Ah! then I will not trouble you. But I leave the Grand Babylon to-night."

"Do you?" she said. "Then will your Highness do me the honour of lunching with me to-day in father's room? Father will be out—he is having a day in the City with some stockbroking persons."

"I shall be charmed," said the Prince, and his face showed that he meant it.

Nella drove off.

If the lunch was a success that result was due partly to Rocco, and partly to Nella. The Prince said little beyond what the ordinary rules of the conversational game demanded. His hostess talked much and talked well, but she failed to rouse her guest. When they had had coffee he took a rather formal leave of her.

"Good-bye, Prince," she said, "but I thought—that is, no, I didn't. Good-bye."

"You thought I wished to discuss something with you. I did; but I have decided that I have no right to burden your mind with my affairs."

"But suppose—suppose I wish to be burdened?"

"That is your good-nature."

"Sit down," she said abruptly, "and tell me everything—mind, everything. I adore secrets."

Almost before he knew it he was talking to her, rapidly, eagerly.

"Why should I weary you with my confidences?" he said. "I don't know, I cannot tell; but I feel that I must. I feel that you will understand me better than anyone else in the world. And yet why should you understand me? Again, I don't know. Miss Racksole, I will disclose to you the whole trouble in a word. Prince Eugen, the hereditary Grand Duke of Posen, has disappeared. Four days ago I was to have met him at Ostend. He had affairs in London. He wished me to come with him. I sent Dimmock on in front, and waited for Eugen. He did not arrive. I telegraphed back to Cologne, his last stopping-place, and I learnt that he had left there in accordance with his programme; I learnt also that he had passed through Brussels. It must have been between Brussels and the railway station at Ostend Quay that he disappeared. He was travelling with a single equerry, and the equerry, too, has vanished. I need not explain to you, Miss Racksole, that when a person of the importance of my nephew contrives to get lost one must proceed cautiously. One cannot advertise for him in the London *Times*. Such a disappearance must be kept secret. The people at Posen and at Berlin believe that Eugen is in London, here, at this hotel; or, rather, they did so believe. But this morning I received a cipher telegram from—from His Majesty the Emperor, a very peculiar telegram, asking when Eugen might be expected to return to Posen, and requesting that he should go first to Berlin. That telegram was addressed to myself. Now, if the Emperor thought that Eugen was here, why should he have caused the telegram to be addressed to me? I have hesitated for three days, but I can hesitate no longer. I must myself go to the Emperor and acquaint him with the facts."

"I suppose you've just got to keep straight with him?" Nella was on the point of saying, but she checked herself and substituted: "The Emperor is your chief, is he not? 'First among equals,' you call him."

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"His Majesty is our over-lord," said Aribert quietly.

"Why do you not take immediate steps to inquire as to the whereabouts of your Royal nephew?" she asked simply. The affair seemed to her just then so plain and straightforward.

"Because one of two things may have happened. Either Eugen may have been, in plain language, abducted, or he may have had his own reasons for changing his programme and keeping in the background—out of reach of telegraph and post and railways."

"What sort of reasons?"

"Do not ask me. In the history of every family there are passages——" He stopped.

"And what was Prince Eugen's object in coming to London?"

Aribert hesitated.

"Money," he said at length. "As a family we are very poor — poorer than anyone in Berlin suspects."

"Prince Aribert," Nella said, "shall I tell you what I think?"

She leant back in her chair, and looked at him out of half-closed eyes. His pale, thin, distinguished face held her gaze as if by some fascination. There could be no mistaking this man for anything else but a Prince.

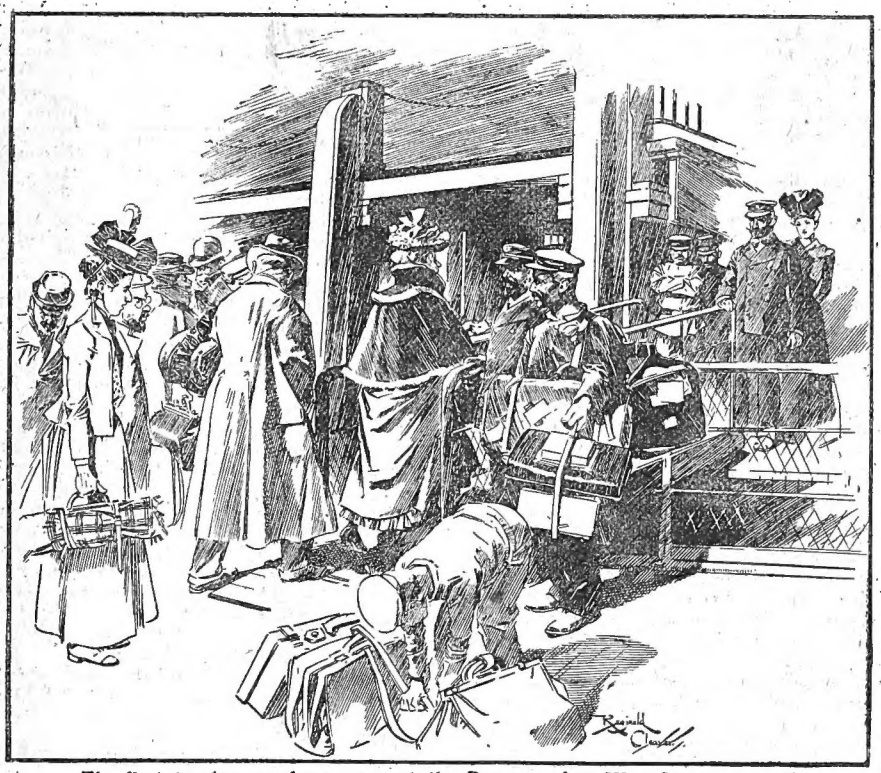
"If you will," he said.

"Prince Eugen is the victim of a plot."

"You think so?"

"I am perfectly convinced of it."

"But why? What can be the object of a plot against him?"



The first to step on shore was not the Baroness, but Miss Spencer herself.

"That is a point of which you should know more than I," she remarked drily.

"Ah! Perhaps, perhaps," he said. "But, dear Miss Racksole, why are you so sure?"

"There are several reasons, and they are connected with Mr. Dimmock. Did you ever suspect, your Highness, that that poor young man was not entirely loyal to you?"

"He was absolutely loyal," said the Prince, with all the earnestness of conviction.

"A thousand pardons, but he was not."

"Miss Racksole, if any other than yourself made that assertion, I would—I would——"

"Consign them to the deepest dungeon in Posen?" she laughed lightly. "Listen!" And she told him of the incidents which had occurred in the night preceding his arrival in the hotel.

"Do you mean, Miss Racksole, that there was an understanding between poor Dimmock and this fellow Jules?"

"There *was* an understanding."

"Impossible!"

"Your Highness, the man who wishes to probe a mystery to its root never uses the word 'impossible.' But I will say this for young Mr. Dimmock. I think he repented, and I think that it was because he repented that he—er—died so suddenly, and that his body was spirited away."

"Why has no one told me these things before?" Aribert exclaimed.

"Princes seldom hear the truth," she said.

He was astonished at her coolness, her firmness of assertion, her air of complete acquaintance with the world.

"Miss Racksole," he said, "if you will permit me to say it, I have never in my life met a woman like you. May I rely on your sympathy—your support?"

"My support, Prince? But how?"

"I do not know," he replied. "But you could help me if you would. A woman, when she has brains, always has more brains than a man."

"Ah!" she said ruefully, "I have no brains, but I do believe I could help you."

What prompted her to make that assertion she could not have explained, even to herself. But she made it, and she had a suspicion—a prescience—that it would be justified, though by what means, through what good fortune, was still a mystery to her.

"Go to Berlin," she said. "I see that you must do that; you have no alternative. As for the rest, we shall see. Something will occur. I shall be here. My father will be here. You must count us as your friends."

He kissed her hand when he left, and afterwards, when she was alone, she kissed the spot his lips had touched again and again. Now, thinking the matter out in the calmness of solitude, all seemed strange, unreal, uncertain to her. Were conspiracies actually possible nowadays? Did queer things actually happen in Europe? And did they actually happen in London hotels? She dined with her father that night.

"I hear Prince Aribert has left," said Theodore Racksole.

"Yes," she assented. She said not a word about their interview.

EIGHTH CHAPTER.

Arrival and Departure of the Baroness.

On the following morning, just before lunch, a lady, accompanied by a maid and a considerable quantity of luggage, came to the Grand Babylon Hotel. She was a plump, little

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old lady, with white hair and an old-fashioned bonnet, and she had a quaint, simple smile of surprise at everything in general. Nevertheless, she gave the impression of belonging to some aristocracy, though not the English aristocracy. Her tone to her maid, whom she addressed in broken English—the girl being apparently English—was distinctly insolent, with the calm, unconscious insolence peculiar to a certain type of Continental nobility. The name on the lady's card ran thus: "Baroness Zerlinski." She desired rooms on the third floor. It happened that Nella was in the bureau.

"On the third floor, madam?" questioned Nella, in her best clerkly manner.

"I did say on de tird floor," said the plump, little old lady.

"We have accommodation on the second floor."

"I wish to be high up, out of de dust and in de light," explained the Baroness.

"We have no suites on the third floor, madam."

"Never mind, no mattaire! Have you not two rooms that communicate?"

Nella consulted her books rather awkwardly.

"Numbers 122 and 123 communicate."

"Or is it 121 and 122?" the little old lady remarked quickly, and then bit her lip.

"I beg your pardon. I should have said 121 and 122."

At the moment Nella regarded the Baroness' correction of her figures as a curious chance, but afterwards, when the Baroness had ascended in the lift, the thing struck her as somewhat strange. Perhaps the Baroness Zerlinski had stayed at the hotel before. For the sake of convenience an index of visitors at the hotel was kept, and the index extended back for thirty years. Nella examined it, but it did not contain the name of Zerlinski. Then it was that Nella began to imagine, what had swiftly crossed her mind when first the Baroness presented herself at the bureau, that the features of the Baroness were remotely familiar to her. She thought, not that she had seen the old lady's face before, but that she had seen somewhere, some time, a face of a similar cast. It occurred to Nella to look at the "Almanach de Gotha"—that record of all the mazes of Continental blue blood; but the "Almanach de Gotha" made no reference to any barony of Zerlinski. Nella inquired where the Baroness meant to take lunch, and was informed that a table had been reserved for her in the dining-room, and she at once decided to lunch in the dining-room herself. Seated in a corner, half-hidden by a pillar, she could survey all the guests.

Presently the Baroness appeared, dressed in black, with a tiny lace shawl, despite the June warmth; very stately, very quaint, and gently smiling. Nella observed her intently. The lady ate heartily, working without haste and without delay through the elaborate menu of the luncheon. Nella noticed that she had beautiful white teeth. Then a remarkable thing happened. A cream puff was served to the Baroness by way of sweets, and Nella was astonished to see the little lady remove the top, and with a spoon quietly take something from the interior which looked like a piece of folded paper. No one who had not been watching with the eye of a lynx would have noticed anything extraordinary in the action; indeed, the chances were nine hundred and ninety-nine to one that it would pass unheeded. But, unfortunately for the Baroness, it was the thousandth chance that happened. Nella jumped up, and walking over to the Baroness, said to her:

"I'm afraid that the tart is not quite nice, your ladyship,'

"Thanks, it is delightful," said the Baroness coldly. Her smile had vanished. "Who are you? I thought you were de bureau clerk."

"My father is the owner of this hotel. I thought there was something in the tart which ought not to have been there."

Nella looked the Baroness full in the face. The piece of folded paper, to which a little cream had attached itself, lay under the edge of a plate.

"No, thanks." The Baroness smiled her simple smile.

Nella departed. She had noticed one trifling thing besides the paper—namely, that the Baroness could pronounce the English "th" sound if she chose.

That afternoon, in her own room, Nella sat meditating at the window for a long time, and then she suddenly sprang up, her eyes brightening.

"I know," she exclaimed, clapping her hands. "It's Miss Spencer, disguised! Why didn't I think of that before?" Her thoughts ran instantly to Prince Aribert. "Perhaps I can help him," she said to herself, and gave a little sigh. She went down to the office and inquired whether the Baroness had given any instructions about dinner. She felt that some plan must be formulated. She wanted to get hold of Rocco, and put him in the rack. She knew now that Rocco, the unequalled, was also concerned in this mysterious affair.

"The Baroness Zerlinski has left, about a quarter of an hour ago," said the attendant.

"But she only arrived this morning."

"The Baroness' maid said that her mistress had received a telegram, and must leave at once. The Baroness paid the bill, and went away in a four-wheeler."

"Where to?"

"The trunks were labelled for Ostend."

Perhaps it was instinct, perhaps it was the mere spirit of adventure; but that evening Nella was to be seen of all men on the steamer for Ostend which leaves Dover at 11 p.m. She had told no one of her intentions—not even her father, who was not in the hotel when she left. She had scribbled a brief note to him to expect her back in a day or two, and had posted this at Dover. The steamer was the *Marie Henriette*, a large and luxurious boat, whose state rooms on deck vie with the glories of the Cunard and White Star liners. One of these state rooms, the best, was evidently occupied, for every curtain of its windows was carefully drawn. Nella did not hope that the Baroness was on board; it was quite possible for the Baroness to have caught the eight o'clock steamer, and it was also possible for the Baroness not to have gone to Ostend at all, but to some other place in an entirely different direction.

Nevertheless, Nella hoped that the lady who called herself Zerlinski might be in that curtained state room, and throughout the smooth, moonlit voyage she never once relaxed her observation of its doors and its windows.

The *Marie Henriette* arrived in Ostend Harbour punctually

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at 2 o'clock in the morning. There was the usual heterogeneous, gesticulating crowd on the quay. Nella kept her post near the door of the state room, and at length she was rewarded by seeing it open. Four middle-aged Englishmen issued from it. From a glimpse of the interior Nella saw that they had spent the voyage in card-playing.

It would not be too much to say that she was distinctly annoyed. She pretended to be annoyed with circumstances, but really she was annoyed with Nella Racksole. At two in the morning, without luggage, without any companionship, and without a plan of campaign, she found herself in a strange foreign port—a port of evil repute, possessing some of the worst-managed hotels in Europe. She strolled on the quay for a few minutes, and then she saw the smoke of another steamer in the offing. She inquired from an official what the steamer might be, and was told that it was the eight o'clock from Dover, which had broken down, put into Calais for some slight necessary repairs, and was arriving at its destination nearly four hours late. Her mercurial spirits rose again. A minute ago she was regarding herself as no better than a ninny engaged in a wild-goose chase. Now she felt that after all she had been very sagacious and cunning. She was morally sure that she would find the Zerlinski woman on this second steamer, and she took all the credit to herself in advance. Such is human nature.

The steamer seemed interminably slow in coming into harbour. Nella walked on the Digue for a few minutes to watch it the better. The town was silent and almost deserted. It had a false and sinister aspect. She remembered tales which she had heard of this glittering resort, which in the season holds more scoundrels than any place in Europe, save only Monte Carlo. She remembered that the gilded adventurers of every nation under the sun foregathered there either for business or pleasure, and that some of the most wonderful crimes of the latter half of the century had been schemed and matured in that haunt of cosmopolitan iniquity.

When the second steamer arrived Nella stood at the end of the gangway, close to the ticket-collector. The first person to step on shore was—not the Baroness Zerlinski, but Miss Spencer herself! Nella turned aside instantly, hiding her face, and Miss Spencer, carrying a small bag, hurried with assured foot-steps to the Custom House. It seemed as if she knew the port of Ostend fairly well. The moon shone like day, and Nella had full opportunity to observe her quarry. She could see now quite plainly that the Baroness Zerlinski had been only Miss Spencer in disguise. There was the same gait, the same movement of the head and of the hips; the white hair was easily to be accounted for by a wig, and the wrinkles by a paint brush and some grease paints. Miss Spencer, whose hair was now its old accustomed yellow, got through the Custom House without difficulty, and Nella saw her call a closed carriage and say something to the driver. The vehicle drove off. Nella jumped into the next carriage—an open one—that came up.

"Follow that carriage," she said succinctly to the driver in French.

"Bien, madame!" The driver whipped up his horse, and the animal shot forward with a terrific clatter over the cobbles. It appeared that this driver was quite accustomed to following other carriages.

"Now I am fairly in for it!" said Nella to herself. She laughed unsteadily, but her heart was beating with an extraordinary thump.

For some time the pursued vehicle kept well in front. It crossed the town nearly from end to end, and plunged into a maze of small streets far on the south side of the Kursaal. Then gradually Nella's equipage began to overtake it. The first carriage stopped with a jerk before a tall, dark house, and Miss Spencer emerged. Nella called to her driver to stop, but he, determined to be in at the death, was engaged in whipping his horse, and he completely ignored her commands. He drew up triumphantly at the tall, dark house just at the moment when Miss Spencer disappeared into it. The other carriage drove away. Nella, uncertain what to do, stepped down from her carriage and gave the driver some money. At the same moment a man reopened the door of the house which had closed on Miss Spencer.

"I want to see Miss Spencer," said Nella impulsively. She couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Miss Spencer?"

"Yes; she's just arrived."

"It's O.K., I suppose," said the man.

"I guess so," said Nella, and she walked past him into the house. She was astonished at her own audacity.

Miss Spencer was just going into a room off the narrow hall. Nella followed her into the apartment, which was shabbily furnished in the Belgian lodging-house style.

"Well, Miss Spencer," she greeted the former Baroness Zerlinski, "I guess you didn't expect to see me. You left our hotel very suddenly this afternoon, and you left it very suddenly a few days ago; and so I've just called to make a few inquiries."

To do that lady justice, Miss Spencer bore the surprising ordeal very well. She did not flinch; she betrayed no emotion. The sole sign of perturbation was in her hurried breathing.

"You have ceased to be the Baroness Zerlinski," Nella continued. "May I sit down?"

"Certainly sit down," said Miss Spencer, copying the girl's tone. "You are a fairly smart young woman, that I will say. What do you want? Weren't my books all straight?"

"Your books were all straight. I haven't come about your books. I have come about the murder of Reginald Dimmock, the disappearance of his body, and the disappearance of Prince Eugen of Posen. I thought you might be able to help me in some investigations which I am making."

Miss Spencer's eyes gleamed, and she stood up and moved swiftly towards the mantelpiece.

"You may be a Yankee, but you're a fool," she said.

She took hold of the bell-rope.

"Don't ring that bell if you value your life," said Nella.

Nella lost consciousness, and slipped gently to the ground.

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"If what?" Miss Spencer remarked.

"If you value your life," said Nella calmly, and with the words she pulled from her pocket a very neat and dainty little revolver.

NINTH CHAPTER.

Two Women and the Revolver.

"You—you're only doing that to frighten me," stammered Miss Spencer, in a low, quavering voice.

"Am I?" Nella replied, as firmly as she could, though her hand shook violently with excitement, could Miss Spencer but have observed it. "Am I? You said just now that I might be a Yankee girl, but I was a fool. Well, I am a Yankee girl, as you call it; and in my country, if they don't teach revolver-shooting in boarding-schools, there are at least a lot of girls who can handle a revolver. I happen to be one of them. I tell you that if you ring that bell you will suffer."

Most of this was simple bluff on Nella's part, and she trembled lest Miss Spencer should perceive that it was simple bluff. Happily for her, Miss Spencer belonged to that order of women who have every sort of courage except physical courage. Miss Spencer could have withstood successfully any moral trial, but persuade her that her skin was in danger, and she would succumb. Nella at once divined this useful fact, and proceeded accordingly, hiding the strangeness of her own sensations as well as she could.

"You had better sit down now," said Nella, "and I will ask you a few questions."

And Miss Spencer obediently sat down, rather white, and trying to screw her lips into a formal smile.

"Why did you leave the Grand Babylon that night?" Nella began her examination, putting on a stern, barrister-like expression.

"I had orders to, Miss Racksole."

"Whose orders?"

"Well, I'm—I'm—the fact is, I'm a married woman, and it was my husband's orders."

"Who is your husband?"

"Tom Jackson—Jules, you know, head waiter at the Grand Babylon."

"So Jules' real name is Tom Jackson? Why did he want you to leave without giving notice?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Miss Racksole. I swear I don't know. He's my husband, and, of course, I do what he tells me, as you will some day do what your husband tells you. Please Heaven you'll get a better husband than mine!"

Miss Spencer showed a sign of tears.

Nella fingered the revolver, and put it at full cock. "Well," she repeated, "why did he want you to leave?" She was tremendously surprised at her own coolness, and somewhat pleased with it, too.

"I can't tell you—I can't tell you."

"You've just got to," Nella said, in a terrible, remorseless tone.

"He—he wished me to come over here to Ostend. Something had gone wrong. Oh! he's a fearful man, is Tom. If I told you, he'd——"

"Had something gone wrong in the hotel, or over here?"

"Both."

"Was it about Prince Eugen of Posen?"

"I don't know—that is, yes, I think so."

"What has your husband to do with Prince Eugen?"

"I believe he has some—some sort of business with him, some money business."

"And was Mr. Dimmock in this business?"

"I fancy so, Miss Racksole. I'm telling you all I know, that I swear."

"Did your husband and Mr. Dimmock have a quarrel that night in Room 111?"

"They had some difficulty."

"And the result of it was that you came to Ostend instantly?"

"Yes; I suppose so."

"And what were you to do in Ostend? What were your instructions from this husband of yours?"

Miss Spencer's head dropped on her arms on the table which separated her from Nella, and she appeared to sob violently.

"Have pity on me," she murmured, "I can't tell you any more."

"Why?"

"He'd kill me if he knew."

"You're wandering from the subject," observed Nella coldly. "This is the last time I shall warn you. Let me tell you plainly I've got the best reasons for being desperate, and if anything happens to you I shall say I did it in self-defence. Now, what were you to do in Ostend?"

"I shall die for this, anyhow," whined Miss Spencer, and then, with a sort of fierce despair, "I had to keep watch on Prince Eugen."

"Where? In this house?"

Miss Spencer nodded, and, looking up, Nella could see the traces of tears on her face.

"Then Prince Eugen was a prisoner? Someone had captured him at the instigation of Jules?"

"Yes, if you must have it."

"Why was it necessary for you specially to come to Ostend?"

"Oh! Tom trusts me. You see, I know Ostend. Before I took that place at the Grand Babylon I had travelled over Europe, and Tom knew that I knew a thing or two."

"Why did you take the place at the Grand Babylon?"

"Because Tom told me to. He said I should be useful to him there."

"Is your husband an Anarchist, or something of that kind, Miss Spencer?"

"I don't know. I'd tell you in a minute if I knew. But he's one of those who keep themselves to themselves."

"Do you know if he has ever committed a murder?"

"Never!" said Miss Spencer, with righteous repudiation of the mere idea.

"But Mr. Dimmock was murdered. He was poisoned. If he had not been poisoned why was his body stolen? It must have been stolen to prevent inquiry, to hide traces. Tell me about that."

"I take my dying oath," said Miss Spencer, standing up a little way from the table, "I take my dying oath I didn't know Mr. Dimmock was dead till I saw it in the newspaper."

"You swear you had no suspicion of it?"

"I swear I hadn't."

Nella was inclined to believe the statement. The woman and the girl looked at each other in the tawdry, frowsy, lamp-lit room. Miss Spencer nervously patted her yellow hair into shape, as if gradually recovering her composure and equanimity. The whole affair seemed like a dream to Nella, a disturbing, sinister nightmare. She was a little uncertain what to say. She felt that she had not yet got hold of any very definite information. "Where is Prince Eugen now?" she asked at length.

"I don't know, miss."

"He isn't in this house?"

"No, miss."

"Ah! We will see presently."

"They took him away, Miss Racksole."

"Who took him away? Some of your husband's friends?"

"Some of his acquaintances."

"Then there is a gang of you?"

"A gang of us—a gang! I don't know what you mean," Miss Spencer quavered.

"Oh, but you must know," smiled Nella calmly. "You can't possibly be so innocent as all that, Mrs. Tom Jackson. You can't play games with me. You've just got to remember that I'm what you call a Yankee girl. There's one thing that I mean to find out, within the next five minutes, and that is—how your charming husband kidnapped Prince Eugen, and why he kidnapped him. Let us begin with the second question. You have evaded it once."

Miss Spencer looked into Nella's face, and then her eyes

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dropped, and her fingers worked nervously with the table-cloth.

"How can I tell you," she said, "when I don't know? You've got the whip-hand of me, and you're tormenting me for your own pleasure." She wore an expression of persecuted innocence.

"Did Mr. Tom Jackson want to get some money out of Prince Eugen?"

"Money! Not he! Tom's never short of money."

"But I mean a lot of money—tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands?"

"Tom never wanted money from anyone," said Miss Spencer doggedly.

"Then had he some reason for wishing to prevent Prince Eugen from coming to London?"

"Perhaps he had. I don't know. If you kill me, I don't know."

Nella stopped to reflect. Then she raised the revolver. It was a mechanical, unintentional sort of action, and certainly she had no intention of using the weapon, but, strange to say, Miss Spencer again cowered before it. Even at that moment Nella wondered that a woman like Miss Spencer could be so simple as to think the revolver would actually be used. Having absolutely no physical cowardice herself, Nella had the greatest difficulty in imagining that other people could be at the mercy of a bodily fear. Still, she saw her advantage, and used it relentlessly, and with as much theatrical gesture as she could command. She raised the revolver till it was level with Miss Spencer's face, and suddenly a new, queer feeling took hold of her. She knew that she would indeed use that revolver now, if the miserable woman before her drove her too far. She felt afraid—afraid of herself; she was in the grasp of a savage, primeval instinct. In a flash she saw Miss Spencer dead at her feet—the police—a court of justice—the scaffold. It was horrible.

"Speak," she said hoarsely, and Miss Spencer's face went whiter.

"Tom did say," the woman whispered rapidly, awesomely, "that if Prince Eugen got to London it would upset his scheme."

"What scheme? What scheme? Answer me."

"Heaven help me, I don't know." Miss Spencer sank into a chair. "He said Mr. Dimmock had turned tail, and he should have to settle him, and then Rocco——"

"Rocco! What about Rocco?" Nella could scarcely hear herself. Her grip of the revolver tightened.

This is a reduced facsimile of our next week's cover. It shows how Nella Racksole is rescued from her perilous position by Prince Aribert.

Miss Spencer's eyes opened wider; she gazed at Nella with a glassy stare.

"Don't ask me. It's death!" Her eyes were fixed as if in horror.

"It is," said Nella, and the sound of her voice seemed to her to issue from the lips of some third person.

"It's death," repeated Miss Spencer, and gradually her head and shoulders sank back, and hung loosely over the chair. Nella was conscious of a sudden revulsion. The woman had surely fainted. Dropping the revolver she ran round the table. She was herself again—feminine, sympathetic, the old Nella. She felt immensely relieved that this had happened. But at the same instant Miss Spencer sprang up from the chair like a cat, seized the revolver, and with a wild movement of the arm flung it against the window. It crashed through the glass, exploding as it went, and there was a tense silence.

"I told you that you were a fool," remarked Miss Spencer slowly, "coming here like a sort of female Jack Sheppard, and trying to get the best of me. We are on equal terms now. You frightened me, but I knew I was a cleverer woman than you, and that in the end, if I kept on long enough, I should win. Now it will be my turn."

Dumbfounded and overcome with a miserable sense of the truth of Miss Spencer's words, Nella stood still. The idea of her colossal foolishness swept through her like a flood. She felt almost ashamed. But even at this juncture she had no fear. She faced the woman bravely, her mind leaping about in search of some plan. She could think of nothing but a bribe—an enormous bribe.

"I admit you've won," she said, "but I've not finished yet. Just listen."

Miss Spencer folded her arms, and glanced at the door, smiling bitterly.

"You know my father is a millionaire; perhaps you know that he is one of the richest men in the world. If I give you my word of honour not to reveal anything that you've told me, what will you take to let me go free?"

"What sum do you suggest?" asked Miss Spencer carelessly.

"Twenty thousand pounds," said Nella promptly. She had begun to regard the affair as a business operation.

Miss Spencer's lip curled.

"A hundred thousand."

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Again Miss Spencer's lip curled.

"Well, say a million. I can rely on my father, and so may you."

"You think you are worth a million to him?"

"I do," said Nella.

"And you think we could trust you to see that it was paid?"

"Of course you could."

"And we should not suffer afterwards in any way?"

"I would give my word, and my father's word."

"Bah!" exclaimed Miss Spencer; "how do you know I wouldn't let you go free for nothing? You are only a rash, silly girl."

"I know you wouldn't. I can read your face too well."

"You are right," Miss Spencer replied slowly. "I wouldn't let you go for all the dollars in America."

Nella felt cold down the spine, and sat down again in her chair. A draught of air from the broken window blew on her cheek. Steps sounded in the passage; the door opened, but Nella did not turn round. She could not move her eyes from Miss Spencer's. There was a noise of rushing water in her ears. She lost consciousness, and slipped limply to the ground.

TENTH CHAPTER.

At Sea.

It seemed to Nella that she was being rocked gently in a vast cradle, which swayed to and fro with a motion at once slow and incredibly gentle. This sensation continued for some time, and there was added to it the sound of a quick, quiet, muffled beat. Soft, exhilarating breezes wafted her forward in spite of herself, and yet she remained in a delicious calm. She wondered if her mother were kneeling by her side, whispering some lullaby in her childish ears. Then strange colours swam before her eyes, her eyelids wavered, and at last she awoke. For a few moments her gaze travelled to and fro in a vain search for some clue to her surroundings. She was aware of nothing except a sense of repose and a feeling of relief that some mighty and fatal struggle was over; she cared not whether she had conquered or suffered defeat in that struggle of her soul with some other soul; it was finished, done with, and the consciousness of its conclusion satisfied and contented her.

Gradually her brain began to grasp the phenomena of her surroundings, and she saw that she was on a yacht, and that the yacht was moving. The motion of the cradle was the smooth rolling of the vessel; the beat was the beat of its screw; the strange colours were the cloud tints thrown by the sun as it rose over a distant and receding shore in the wake of the yacht; her mother's lullaby was the crooned song of the man at the wheel.

Nella all through her life had had many experiences of yachting. She had yachted in all seasons and all weathers. She loved the water, and now it seemed deliciously right and proper that she should be on the water again. She raised her head to look round, and then let it sink back; she was fatigued, enervated; she desired only solitude and calm; she had no care, no anxiety, no responsibility; a hundred years might have passed since her meeting with Miss Spencer, and the memory of that meeting appeared to have faded into the remotest background of her mind.

It was a small yacht, and her practised eye at once told that it belonged to the highest aristocracy of pleasure craft. As she reclined in the deck-chair (it did not occur to her at that moment to speculate as to the identity of the person who had led her therein) she examined all visible details of the vessel. The deck was as white and smooth as her own hand, and the seams ran along its length like blue veins. All the brass-work, from the band round the slender funnel to the concave surface of the binnacle, shone like gold. The tapered masts stretched upwards at a rakish angle, and the rigging seemed like spun silk. No sails were set; the yacht was under steam, and doing about seven or eight knots. She judged that it was a boat of a hundred tons or so, probably Clyde-built, and not more than two or three years old. No one was to be seen on deck except the man at the wheel; this man wore a blue jersey; but there was neither name nor initial on the jersey, nor was there a name on the white lifebuoys lashed to the main rigging, nor on the polished dinghy which hung high on the starboard davits. She called to the man, and called again, in a feeble voice, but the steerer took no notice of her, and continued his quiet song as though nothing else existed in the universe save the yacht, the sea, the sun, and himself.

Then her eyes swept the outline of the land from which they were hastening, and she could just distinguish a lighthouse and a great, white, irregular dome, which she recognised as the Kursaal at Ostend, that gorgeous rival of the gaming palace at Monte Carlo. So she was leaving Ostend. The rays of the sun fell on her caressingly, like a restorative. All around the water was changing from wonderful greys and dark blues to still more wonderful pinks and translucent unearthly greens; the magic kaleidoscope of dawn was going forward in its accustomed way, regardless of the vicissitudes of mortals. Here and there in the distance she descried a sail—the brown sail of some Ostend fishing-boat returning home after a night's trawling. Then the beat of paddles caught her ear, and a steamer blundered past, wallowing clumsily among the waves like a tortoise. It was the *Swallow*, from London. She could see some of its passengers leaning curiously over the aft-rail. A girl in a mackintosh signalled to her, and mechanically she answered the salute with her arm. The officer on the bridge of the *Swallow* hailed the yacht, but the man at the wheel offered no reply. In another minute the *Swallow* was nothing but a blot in the distance.

Nella tried to sit straight in the deck-chair, but she found herself unable to do so. Throwing off the rug which covered her, she discovered that she had been tied to the chair by means of a piece of broad webbing. Instantly she was alert, awake, angry; she knew that her perils were not over; she felt that possibly they had scarcely yet begun. Her lazy contentment, her dreamy sense of peace and repose, vanished utterly, and she steeled herself to meet the dangers of a grave and difficult situation.

Just at that moment a man came up from below. He was a man of forty or so, clad in irreproachable blue, with a peaked yachting cap. He raised the cap politely.

"Good morning," he said. "Beautiful sunrise, isn't it?" The clever and calculated insolence of his tone cut her like a lash as she lay bound in the chair. Like all people who have lived easy and joyous lives in those fair regions where gold smoothes every crease and law keeps a tight hand on disorder, she found it hard to realise that there were other regions where gold was useless and law without power. Twenty-four hours ago she would have declared it impossible that such an experience as she had suffered could have happened to anyone; she would have talked airily about civilisation and the nineteenth century, and progress and the police. But her experience was teaching her that human nature remains always the same, and that beneath the thin crust of security, on which we good citizens exist, the dark and secret forces of crime continue to move, just as they did in the days when you couldn't go from Cheapside to Chelsea without being set upon by thieves. Her experience was in a fair way to teach her this lesson better than she could have learnt it even in the bureaus of the detective police of Paris, London, and St. Petersburg.

"Good morning," the man repeated, and she glanced at him with a sullen, angry gaze.

"You!" she exclaimed, "you, Mr. Thomas Jackson, if that is your name! Loose me from this chair, and I will talk to you."

(Another long instalment next week.)

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"WELL, Caroline, how have you enjoyed yourself?" asked Mrs. Wheatley, as her daughter, looking not a little fatigued, entered their room at the hotel, and threw herself languidly on a lounge.

Mrs. Wheatley was a wealthy widow, just then sojourning at a certain rather fashionable watering-place, with her daughter Caroline, and her niece, Josephine Stanley.

"Fairly well, mamma," was the reply. "These yachting parties are always pleasant, you know, although to-day has been fearfully warm."

And Miss Caroline began fanning herself with an exceedingly pretty black velvet riding-hat.

"Clive Grosvenor was devoted as usual, I suppose?"

"Yes; he is still unchangeably loyal," laughed Caroline.

"That man's attentions to you have been invaluable, my dear, in a social way. Young, handsome, enormously wealthy, and of unquestioned birth, he is one of the most powerful friends you could possibly have made. Only yesterday, Mrs. Churchill said to me, in that pointed way of hers, 'What a remarkable fact it is that Clive Grosvenor should make any girl instantly the fashion, so to speak, by merely behaving politely to her!' It was meant for a very cutting speech, but, of course, missed its mark. Everybody knows that Clive Grosvenor has behaved much more than 'merely politely' to you, Caroline."

"I think you are wrong there, mamma. Clive likes me, but——"

"Nonsense, my dear! We have discussed that point too often already, to quarrel about it now. And I always *do* feel like quarrelling with you, Caroline, whenever you make the absurd statement that the man is only friendly with you. Let us talk of other matters. How did Josephine appear to enjoy herself?"

"Poor Josephine! Nobody noticed her, I believe. Nobody ever does."

"She is such a nonentity," said Mrs. Wheatley.

"Not exactly that, mamma, either."

Caroline appeared slightly puzzled for an instant, and then continued:

"The fact is, Josephine has never been accustomed to the sort of people one meets here. Her life has been quiet, and humdrum, and commonplace. She is clever enough, and can talk cleverly enough, after her own style. But then her style is not theirs. Gay butterflies like Charley Standford and Fred Effingham, and Clive Grosvenor, too, for that matter, prefer something a little less dignified and conventional than Josephine Stanley."

"And, then, she is not pretty," said Mrs. Wheatley, "though some people, it is true, consider her face attractive. I suppose, also, her known poverty has a great deal to do with the way in which she is treated. I think, for my part, we had better send her home, Caroline. You know I always objected to the plan of bringing her here, and your persistence in the matter alone conquered my prejudice."

"You were convinced that she would enjoy herself, and very possibly return with a lover. That last belief was simply absurd, as I told you. Poor girls don't get lovers nowadays. And though nobody feels more compassion than I do for Ellen Stanley, my own sister, with her ridiculously small income, and her family of seven daughters, not counting Josephine, still——"

But Caroline had risen from the lounge, and disappeared from the room to dress for dinner, while Mrs. Wheatley's sympathetic remark was yet in course of enunciation.

* * * * * *

"Will you agree to it, Clive?" said Charles Standford.

"It will be a jolly experiment," said Fred Effingham.

"Nonsense!" said Clive Grosvenor.

"Of course it's nonsense," acquiesced the first speaker. "Neither Fred nor myself pretends to assert the contrary. But, then, it will be, as Fred says, the jolliest sort of experiment. You are to devote yourself for the space of a month to one of the least attractive girls in the hotel, and perform the noble deed of perhaps calling from obscurity some unhappy creature who has long pined for distinction. Who knows but that some social diamond may be brought to light, as it were, from the rubbish of—of——"

"Spare yourself further metaphorical effort, Charley," said Clive Grosvenor, smiling. "I am not so conceited as to believe that my devotions would make a fashionable beauty out of an ogress."

"But we need not select an ogress," put in Fred Effingham. "There are plenty of girls in the hotel who have not the slightest claims to beauty, and yet do not merit so severe a title as that you suggest. The case, as it now stands, is simply this: Charley and myself are anxious to find out whether you are socially powerful enough, Clive, to make any woman popular whom you choose to treat with marked attention. Hitherto your lady friends have all been personally, or at least mentally, attractive. Our idea is to provide you with some tame, uninteresting specimen of maidenhood, and to enjoy the joke of seeing her raised into a position of conspicuous favour. We have selected the object of your future devotion."

"Is it possible?" laughed Clive. "May I inquire her name?"

"She is that stupid little cousin of Caroline Wheatley's."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Mr. Grosvenor; "do you expect me to undertake such a piece of voluntary martyrdom as——"

"Not quite so loud, Clive," Charley Standford interrupted.

The three friends had been seated on the hotel verandah during this conversation, enjoying their cigars and the pleasant August moonlight at a rather late hour in the evening.

"Recollect," Charley continued, "that there are such characters in the world as eavesdroppers, and somebody *might* be listening to this little discussion of ours. Indeed, I thought I detected a slight movement just now in one of those blinds yonder," pointing, as he spoke, towards a window which opened out on the verandah from the adjacent hotel drawing-room.

"Will you consent, Clive?" asked Fred Effingham.

Clive Grosvenor did consent after a half hour of further

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persuasion on the part of his two friends, and Miss Josephine Stanley was the young lady whom he agreed to honour with his attentions.

* * * * *

Byron awoke one morning to find himself famous. Of Miss Stanley it may be said that she awoke one morning to find herself—somebody. Clive Grosvenor's civilities had suddenly transferred themselves from Caroline to Caroline's cousin. People stared and wondered, and stared again. What *did* it all mean? No more whimsical man than Clive Grosvenor ever existed, but that his caprice should have assumed so extraordinary a form as in the present instance created universal surprise.

First one good lady and then another began to discover "a certain something, you know," about "that cousin of Caroline Wheatley's." From having been utterly obscure, Josephine Stanley found herself rapidly becoming popular among the guests at the hotel. Where everybody had previously ignored, everybody now noticed and smiled upon her. Meanwhile, Clive Grosvenor's devotion became daily more and more marked.

The new recipient of social favour bore her good fortune with little outward evidence that it had either amazed or delighted her. Nothing, perhaps, could ever have made Josephine Stanley's manners resemble those of the born-and-bred Society woman. She was incapable of flirting. She knew nothing of the artful ruses by means of which coquettes accomplish their proudest triumphs. She had a pair of soft, deep-blue eyes (assuredly the best feature which her face could boast of), but she never "used" them. She had a ready fluency of conversation, but she could not speak little tender falsehoods, which pass by the name of compliments, and look as if every syllable she had uttered were gospel truth. Briefly, she was a simple, sensible, good-hearted, straightforward girl, and by no means the "nonentity" which Mrs. Wheatley had chosen to call her.

That lady was greatly horrified, and still more angered, by-the-way, at Clive Grosvenor's sudden abandonment of Caroline, and his inexplicable devotion to her niece. But then, Mrs. Wheatley was a woman of the world, and chose to mask her chagrin, refraining, for the present at least, from all discussion of Mr. Grosvenor's inconstancy, except during one or two private interviews with her daughter Caroline.

"I suppose Clive has deserted me because he's disgusted with me, mamma," that young lady said, carelessly. "For my part, I never *particularly* liked him. Fred Effingham is much pleasanter, I fancy, though he doesn't possess thirty thousand a year, and isn't quite so much the fashion."

Whereupon Mrs. Wheatley had chidden her daughter rather severely on the subject of her annoying unconcern in so important a matter, and had announced her intention of "giving Miss Josephine a piece of her mind."

"What fault has poor Josephine committed?" asked Caroline, smiling. "You certainly cannot blame her, mamma, for being attractive enough to win Clive Grosvenor's attentions—you who complained only a fortnight ago of her being a nonentity!"

The piece of Mrs. Wheatley's mind was administered, however, and one evening, just at twilight, Josephine Stanley appeared on the hotel verandah looking a trifle paler than usual, and showing on her countenance the traces of recent tears. Clive Grosvenor presently came and stood by her side.

"You are looking ill," he said. "I trust that you do not feel so, Miss Stanley."

Josephine hesitated a moment, and then answered in a low voice, that trembled a little despite her efforts to master it:

"I have just heard a most disagreeable piece of news, Mr. Grosvenor. It will be necessary for me to leave for London to-morrow morning. Of course, the thought of doing so is far from pleasant."

"You more than astonish me," Clive Grosvenor said, in a voice that was full of very genuine earnestness. "Are Mrs. Wheatley and your cousin to accompany you?"

"No; I shall go alone."

There was quite a long silence between them. Clive Grosvenor's face was slightly averted from Josephine's, and he appeared absorbed in some rather deeply engrossing thought. Perhaps he was thinking about the real reason of her departure.

"As I shall have to leave rather early in the morning, Mr. Grosvenor," Josephine said, presently, "it will be necessary for me to spend this evening in preparations. I shall, therefore, have to bid you good-bye, now; unless you choose," she added, with a faint smile, "that it shall be only *au revoir* until eight o'clock to-morrow morning. However, I know your distaste for early rising, and shall not think of making such a cruel exaction."

She had given him her hand while speaking. They were standing where nobody could see them, and the twilight shadows were darkening every instant. Clive Grosvenor did not release her hand quite as promptly as Josephine expected.

"I shall feel quite lost for society when you are gone, Miss Stanley."

"I can scarcely believe that, Mr. Grosvenor."

"And why not?" he asked, still retaining her hand.

"Because"—she hesitated a second, and then her voice grew clear and firm—"because *that stupid little cousin of Caroline Wheatley's* will relieve you from a *voluntary martyrdom* by her departure, will she not?"

"Can it be possible!" exclaimed Clive Grosvenor, stepping back several paces in his astonishment, "can it be possible, Miss Stanley, that Fred Effingham or Charley Standford have been base enough——"

"To narrate your little conversation on this verandah one evening, about three weeks ago? Not at all, Mr. Grosvenor; I myself heard it."

"*You* heard it?"

"Every syllable. I had left my fan in the drawing-room, and came downstairs to procure it. Happening to hear myself alluded to, I played the eavesdropper during the next half hour. Atrocious, was it not?"

"The joke? It was infamous!"

"I did not refer to that. Why should I consider it so? It has been the cause of all my enjoyment this summer. People have deigned to notice me since your singular resolution was adopted."

"For that reason, perhaps, you have tolerated my society, despising me as you must have done."

She was silent, and Clive Grosvenor continued:

"Assuredly I despise myself. Can I *ever* hope for your forgiveness?" Then his voice grew very low and tender, and he had somehow managed to take Josephine's hand within his own once more. "Can I ever hope for something far dearer to me, Josephine, than even your forgiveness? Something quite inestimable, I mean. Your love, darling; a treasure which I value beyond everything in the world."

Those deep-blue eyes of Josephine Stanley's were glistening with tears as they met Clive Grosvenor's, but a smile played about her lips.

"How I could revenge myself, now, Clive Grosvenor, if I chose to be revengeful."

"*If*, dearest. But I am sure you would rather cultivate the divine virtue of forgiveness, and in promising to be my wife, heap coals of fire upon this offending head of mine."

Well, reader, I have only to add that Josephine was not found lacking in the "divine virtue," and that she is Mrs. Clive Grosvenor now.

Fred Effingham and Charley Standford have been sworn to inviolate secrecy concerning a conversation which once took place between themselves and Clive on the verandah of the hotel. Between the former young gentleman and Miss Caroline Wheatley rumour affirms that a marriage will shortly be celebrated.

Mrs. Wheatley is now reconciled to her niece, and generally speaks of her as "dear, clever Josephine." A slight alteration, is it not, in Mrs. Wheatley's previous estimate of Josephine's character and mental qualities? But, then, there are some people capable of accommodating their opinions to all sorts of social exigencies.

V. Lowell.

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WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO.

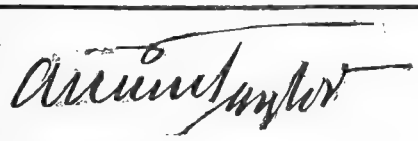
Below you will find six signatures. Each of these signatures is the ordinary signature of the person to whom it belongs. The writing is not assumed for the occasion; it is just the way in which each of the persons signs his name to letters or to cheques. The first five sets of signatures have already appeared, and the numbers containing them can be had from any newsvendor, or from this office for 1½d. each post free.

What you have to do is to print in the space opposite each signature the name (initials, Christian name and surname) which you think it to be. No one but the Editor possesses the correct names of all the signatures shown. If you are in doubt as to the correct rendering of any signature or signatures ask some of your friends. When you have filled up the coupon cut it out and attach it to the five which have already appeared—arranging them in numerical order—then put all in an envelope addressed to THE EDITOR, "Short Stories," Pearson's Buildings, Henrietta Street, London, W.C., which you must post so as to arrive not later than by first post on Tuesday, April 26th. The envelope must be marked "Signature" in the top left-hand corner.

CONDITIONS.

(1) The name must be clearly printed in ink opposite each signature.
(2) Only one name is allowed in each space.
(3) No alterations are allowed in the words.
(4) Each competitor may send only one set of coupons, but all the members of one household may compete. Each set will be accepted independently.
(5) In all cases the Editor's decision is final, and competitors may only enter on this condition.

COUPON No. 6.

No. 30. 	
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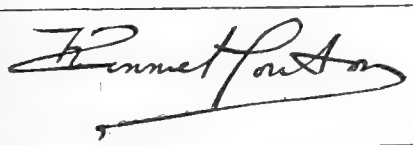
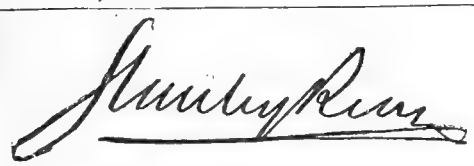
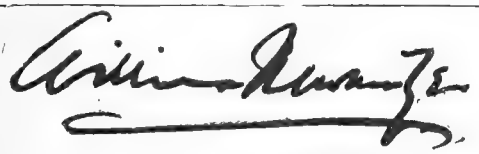
No. 32. 	
No. 33. 	
No. 34. 	
No. 35.	

I hereby agree to abide by the conditions of the competition printed above.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

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Unsolved Love Problems.

A Prize of One Guinea is offered to the reader who sends in the most Satisfactory Solution to the Problem. Replies should not exceed one hundred words. See "Your Editor Chats."

XI.—Brian Cresswell's Choice.

Brian Cresswell's mother was an Irishwoman; moreover, as a charming, impulsive girl of eighteen, she had married his father after a month's acquaintance. That the marriage had turned out a complete success, was, so her friends told her, "more by good luck than good management," it might (in fact, they felt it ought to) have been a terrible failure, but as she replied with her irresistible smile, "it wasn't."

This marriage, being the cause of Brian's presence in the world, what wonder he should fall desperately and entirely in love with a stranger at first sight.

It was a dreary day in February, but Brian's habitual cheerfulness was not to be damped by such things as pouring rain, a bitter north-west wind, and unutterable slush, so he strode cheerily along a dripping street in the west of London on his way to his club, till suddenly a slight figure, in a flapping mackintosh and struggling with a refractory umbrella, ran full into him.

They cried, "I beg your pardon" in unison, and Brian looked down from his superior height on the most glorious pair of dark eyes he had ever seen, raised to his in half laughing apology.

The face was small, and only slightly tinted with pink, the features were delicately formed, especially the mouth, which possessed the sweet curves seldom found after childhood, while curly black hair, rendered rebellious by the damp, stood out round the finely-poised head, the eyes—but here Brian completely lost his footing and fell, head over ears, desperately in love.

It was only a glimpse, however, and then the umbrella was once more under control and the little lady continued her way.

Brian was not one who suffered from want of decision in a crisis, and he turned immediately to face the blast and follow the black mackintosh as it fluttered before him.

In a street sacred to doctors he saw her run lightly up the steps, and was almost immediately admitted. He eagerly scanned the brass plate at the door—"Henry Lytton, M.D., F.R.C.S."

Having waited in the rain an hour, and, finding she did not re-emerge, he concluded she lived there and was no patient.

For some days he haunted the neighbourhood, and was rewarded by seeing her several times, and each time she appeared in his eyes more beautiful than ever.

Such an inactive campaign did not long recommend itself to him, and one day he called boldly at Dr. Lytton's, and, sending in his card, requested an interview. After waiting in some trepidation for about thirty minutes he was at last summoned to the doctor's presence.

A tall, thin man with close-cropped, iron-grey hair, a tightly-compressed mouth, and piercing, grey eyes, set very close together, greeted him in a grave, professional manner.

"Her father, I suppose," he thought to himself. "Somehow I don't much like the look of him, but here goes," and he said his carefully-prepared speech: "I wish to consult you professionally, Dr. Lytton, and I would be much obliged if you will give me a thorough examination, as I should like to know if I am quite sound."

The doctor bade him strip, and for forty minutes there was a heavy silence broken only, from time to time, by curt commands from the doctor.

This ended, he bade him put on his clothes again, and Brian was surprised to his heart beating with a nervous suspense as he waited to hear what should be the verdict, but he pulled himself together saying, mentally:

"What rubbish, I am quite well. There must be something in that mental telepathy after all, and it is the agonies of all the poor diseased beggars who have been examined in this room before me that affect me."

Then he answered searching, and, in some cases, most unexpected questions from the great man, and again he was disagreeably surprised to find that when he thought about it there certainly were symptoms of a kind to describe.

At last the doctor spoke:

"I take it that you really want the truth?"

Brian bowed his head.

"Well, then, I must tell you that I find you are suffering from an obscure disease that I have made my especial study, but which has as yet no name."

With the natural tendency of the mind when suffering from shock, to seize on any triviality, Brian found himself wondering if it could be called "Lyttonensis," or "Lyttonitis," but after a silence he asked in a dazed manner:

"Is it dangerous?"

"Yes," was the answer.

"But—but," stammered the young man.

The doctor raised his hand, and went on impassively: "I know what you would say—you feel well. That may be, for the disease is not yet far advanced, but in four months' time you will be feeling ill enough to believe anything may be the matter with you."

Brian stood aghast. Was his little comedy, then, to become a tragedy? Was it possible death could be so near to him? Still, he was not going to let himself be knocked down tamely; he meant to make a fight for this bright and beautiful thing called life, when one is young and in love.

He drew himself up stiffly, drew a deep breath, and said:

"Is there no cure?"

"There used not to be," said Dr. Lytton, "but I have, I am glad to say, sufficiently separated its symptoms from another and better-known disease which supervenes in its later stages, to be able to cure it by an operation before it reaches that state."

Brian's colour came back, and his spirits rose. Only an operation!

"And will you perform this operation for me now?" he asked impetuously.

The doctor almost permitted himself to smile at such precipitancy.

"Gently, my good sir; you are by no means sufficiently advanced yet for an operation to be possible. Besides, where do you live?"

"My real home, that is to say, where my parents live, is in Ireland, but I have diggings in town, and chiefly live at my club."

The doctor reflected, and then said:

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"Have you any ties, business or otherwise, that would prevent you taking up your residence here with me for four or five months?"

Brian's heart gave a leap. Here was the chance he had sought. Four or five months in the same house as his divinity—why, it was cheaply obtained at the price of an operation; for, with characteristic inconsequence, he had flung all thought of danger to the winds, and only felt pleasure at the success of his plan. He replied, therefore, with joyful eagerness:

"I have no ties whatever. It would suit me excellently to come here, and I can come at once if you like."

Dr. Lytton looked somewhat surprised at the change in his tone, but appointed a date and hour for him to commence his residence with him.

A week later Brian was installed in the doctor's house. He found he had to observe strict regulations about his food and exercise, and to submit to frequent examinations, but was otherwise left to amuse himself as he liked. Need it be said that he contrived to see a good deal of the beautiful Lucille, and that she appeared not averse to his society, even when she had a good deal of it?

He made many discoveries, for Lucille was quite young, and as artless as perfect innocence, combined with a complete ignorance of the world, could make her.

He learnt that she was the ward of Dr. Lytton, and not his daughter, and her name was Lucille Lester. She was an orphan and she believed she would have a considerable fortune when she was twenty-one. Dr. Lytton was always most kind, but rather strict. She had another guardian, an uncle, but he lived right in the depths of the country and was rather cross, so, though she paid him a visit every year, she was glad to get back to the doctor.

All this and more she told him during their frequent conversations, undisturbed by the presence of the old lady, formerly Lucille's governess, who played propriety now she was grown up; and every day found Brian more in love with her beauty, her purity of mind, and her loving, child-like disposition.

The doctor was a busy man, seeing patients, attending hospitals, and delivering lectures, and he spent but little time with them, though when he was there little passed that his penetrating, grey eyes did not see.

At the end of a month he sent Brian to another specialist to hear his opinion of his case, and he was told:

"My diagnosis agrees exactly with Lytton's, and you cannot do better than remain under his care. He cured a man by a very clever operation a few months ago, and you seem a likely subject for a similar one. And let me tell you, young man, you are in the hands of the only man in England, I should say, in the world, who can help you."

And the specialist, who was a benevolent-looking old man, beamed at poor Brian till he felt that he ought to be proud of being a "likely subject" for this new operation, but somehow he felt more depressed than elated by the smiling assurance that his life was in this man's hands.

Dr. Lytton received in silence the repetition of his famous colleague's opinion of his powers, and at the end of his examinations he said:

"The disease has so far progressed that I think I could conduct a successful operation in two weeks' time."

Brian was delighted that the time of suspense and irksome restrictions should be drawing to a close. To his sanguine nature, there was no fear of failure, no dread of the operation, and he thanked the doctor with emphasis.

Dr. Lytton, however, checked his words by an impatient gesture, and motioned him to a chair.

"Will you kindly sit down? I am about to speak to you on private matters." And as Brian, wondering, obeyed, he continued: "Am I correct in supposing that you wish to marry my ward, Miss Lester?"

Brian was still young enough to blush, as he stammered:

"If I am so greatly honoured as to gain her consent."

"Tush!" replied the doctor. "I have been watching you, and I see you have made good use of your time. Lucille is still a mere child, and likely to be impressed by the first good-looking young man that pays her attention."

Brian, lifted to the skies by the first sentence, found the descent rude indeed, but lest indignation should betray him into impolitic speech, he determined to keep silence as long as he could. The doctor's next words, spoken with his grey eyes bent almost threateningly upon him, were a still greater surprise to him.

"I desire that you immediately leave here and give up all idea of ever marrying her."

All Brian's hot Irish blood rushed to his face at the tone of almost contemptuous command in the elder man's voice, but, still restraining himself, he only said:

"Why?"

"Because I say so."

Brian's breath came thickly, as he stood with his hands pressed against the table, and looked defiantly into the unflinching grey eyes.

"As her guardian?" he asked.

"As her guardian, in so far as it behoves me to look after her best interests, and," he added, with an almost insolent tone, "as a man, because I intend to marry her myself."

If a thunderbolt had fallen, Brian could not have been more astonished.

"You!" he cried, and laughed.

The genuine incredulity in his tone, and his laugh, stung the seemingly impassive man, and he answered sharply:

"Yes! Why not? I am still in the prime of life. At any rate, she stands more chance of happiness with me than with the first whipper-snapper that comes along attracted by her money."

"You're a liar, and you know it!" cried Brian in overpowering wrath. "I have enough money for both without touching hers; and it is for her to decide wherein lies her happiness."

Dr. Lytton was his cool, contemptuous self again.

"There is no need for such violent language. A child such as Lucille is no judge of wherein lies her true happiness. Ask her now, and she would no doubt choose you; six months hence, supposing you have left this house, she would be doubtful; a year hence, she would give herself to me and would never regret it to the day of her death."

Brian's blood was boiling, but his delicacy forbade his taking her love for granted before it had been declared. Nevertheless, he opened his mouth to protest, but Dr. Lytton went on smoothly, taking no notice:

"All I require, therefore, is that you should go into a nursing home till I can effect an operation, and that you should give me your word of honour as a gentleman never to seek to gain Lucille Lester's love from this time forth."

Then Brian burst out vehemently:

"I'm hanged if I give it!"

Dr. Lytton raised his eyebrows and replied, speaking rather more slowly than usual:

"Then you are a dead man."

Brian felt his blood run cold.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Simply this. Unless you give the required promise, I refuse to perform the operation, and unless you are operated on, you will be a dead man in three months' time; probably less."

Brian sat down heavily. Was death, then, so near?

Dr. Lytton, watching him, saw the drops of sweat gather on his brow, and said:

"The end is sudden—and painful."

Brian lifted his head and said bitterly:

"I believe you are inhumanity itself. Anyone human would have *some* pity in them. You offer me life, but at what a price! What is life without love?"

"Or what is love without life?" said the doctor with a meaning smile. "Come, I will give you till to-morrow to decide," and he left the room.

Thus Brian was left with this terrible choice before him. Life without love, or love without life. Now he saw why he had been sent to the great specialist, that he might know there was no escape for him. Had he not said: "Lytton is the only man in the world who can help you" **L. Hughes.**

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DEFINITIONS.

Relating how a Girl Fell in Love.

"Oh, dear!" yawned Violet Mace. "This is dreadfully slow. Rain, rain, rain! I don't believe it has left off for two minutes since yesterday morning. Thirty-six hours right off—two whole days and one night! I've read the newspaper and the last book from Mudie's. If it rains to-morrow I shall either go mad or be obliged to read some of the learned books which my grave brother pores over in solitude."

"Perhaps you might learn something even from them," suggested her companion with just a touch of sarcasm.

"Of course, my dear Ada, you will defend your sweetheart," was the retort. "I don't think that there ever were a brother and sister so different in tastes as Will and I. He will be a professor some day, I haven't the least doubt; and when I come to see you I shall find him up to his eyes in treatises, and you making references for him when you can spare time from your domestic duties."

Ada laughed pleasantly. She was very fond of her cousin, who was two years younger than herself, and whose merry spirits made things very agreeable for those with whom she came in contact. Ada was a little more sedate, but less so than you would imagine from Violet's words; she could join in out-door and indoor sports and games with as much ardour as she could listen to a lecture on botany or read an article on astronomy.

"I hope it will be fine to-morrow and the next day," said Ada with pretended sympathy, "so that we can have that game of lawn lennis. That will give you an opportunity of spending some of the superabundance of your animal spirits. I do not despair of your turning your attention to more serious things, some day, than playing tricks on people and otherwise having what you are pleased to call a good time. I noticed during our last game that you seemed somewhat interested in one of the members, who showed a certain gravity in his demeanour. You should try to secure such a man for a partner"—there was a peculiar intonation in Ada's voice just then—"as he would be able to steady you a little. You want a little ballast."

"Ballast!" cried Violet contemptuously, but there was just a little more colour in her cheeks. Stooping, she took up a book which was lying on the carpet and held it at arm's length. "With this sort of thing, I suppose? 'Social Economy at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century.' This is what Will studies. I'll just see what it is like; very little in it, after all, I expect."

Just then her brother entered, and Violet, believing that her absence would be more welcome than her presence, remembered that she had something to do in her own room and retired.

She took the book with her unconsciously, and, finding that she still held it when she reached her own room, she sat down and began to scan the pages.

"I don't see much in this, nor do I understand why Will wants to be quiet when reading it," mused Violet a few minutes later. "Look at these definitions. '*Capital* is a product saved and destined for reproduction.' I always thought that capital was money; why ever can't people say so plainly? '*Credit* is an anticipation of the future.' H'm! If I get things on credit I am anticipating part of my future income, that's all right; but what about the man who lets me have the goods? There are lots of funny things like that. Another time when I want to read something really funny I shall try one of Will's serious books!"

She was about to put the book down when she caught sight of the name of the author.

"Professor Plowden! I believe he is the old gentleman I once saw at Mrs. Margetson's. I remember he had a most attractive bald spot on the top of his head, and that he looked so simple that I thought how easy it would be to make an April fool of him or something of that kind. I can't imagine him to be the writer of a learned book; I'm sure it would be perfectly easy to play a joke on the dear man. Oh, how I should like to have the chance!"

An amused smile testified to the pleasure that such an escapade would afford to Violet Mace. But she little thought how soon the opportunity would present itself.

The two following days were fine, and the lawn tennis was a complete success. The grave young gentleman was Violet's partner in one game and paid her some attention afterwards, which brought upon her a little chaff from Ada and caused her to be more boisterous than usual in an endeavour to show that she didn't care.

Rather more than a week later a party was given by Mrs. Margetson to which Violet, her brother, and her cousin were invited. Violet had by this time almost forgotten the book on "Social Economy" and its author, but both were suddenly recalled to her memory by seeing the old gentleman with the simple face among the guests. In a moment the mischievous spirit was alive, and she determined to carry out her idea of quietly poking fun at the learned gentleman. It did not take her long to secure an introduction, and, to her great inward amusement, she was soon engaged in conversation with him.

"I've been reading very deeply lately, Professor Plowden," said Violet demurely, assuming what she thought to be an expression befitting a blue stocking. "I have been studying your book on 'Social Economy.'"

"Indeed! I should hardly have thought—— H'm! do you like that sort of study?"

"Immensely! Now, frankly, I see that you find it difficult to believe it. I will prove it to you. On page six you give a definition of 'capital'—I remember it perfectly." And she rattled off the Professor's own words.

The writer of the book showed his pleasure clearly on his clean-shaven face. Then Violet gave him his own definitions of "value" and "property" and quoted one or two sentences which she remembered, but the exact meaning of which she did not understand. She was so encouraged in her jesting by the smiles on the Professor's countenance that she became bolder and began to quiz him about his definition of "credit."

But the Professor did not appear to notice any trace of levity; he entered into an explanation which he thought would make it quite clear, then he began to press her with questions and remarks which threatened to turn the tables on her—for it naturally did not require much to place her beyond her depth—and made her half sorry that she had undertaken to poke fun at him. She breathed more freely when the Professor ceased talking economics and expressed

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his unbounded pleasure at the fact that his book had attracted such attention as to cause a young lady to read and derive instruction from it.

"I am sure you will shine as an economist one day, Miss Mace," he cried, as their conversation came to an end. "You must permit me to send you a complete set of my works. I shall take it as an honour as well as a pleasure."

Violet pretended to be delighted, but in truth she was rather dismayed. Will and Ada would laugh at her when the books came, and whenever she might chance to meet the Professor she would be in an awkward fix, for she could never wade through his works and yet he would be talking to her about the subjects dealt with therein. However, there was no help for it.

On the following morning, as she was sitting in the drawing-room, Violet was informed by Ada that a gentleman—not a messenger—was waiting to see her with a parcel of books from Professor Plowden. There was a sly smile on Ada's face which Violet accepted as the first result of her prank of the previous evening. Before she had time to realise what was happening, she found herself confronted by Mr. Laurence Jordan, the "grave gentleman" of the lawn tennis party, and saw a figure vanishing through the doorway.

"My uncle, Professor Plowden, asked me to bring these books to you, Miss Mace," she heard him say. "The dear old gentleman was so extremely delighted with your knowledge of economics that he would send them by no one else; he thought I might be able to help you with some more definitions."

Violet's eyes dropped and her face grew scarlet; all the old defiant air had vanished. She felt that the Professor's nephew was retaliating, that he was quizzing her, and she recognised that the Professor had seen through her jesting. It was decidedly humiliating to have this handsome fellow fighting her with her own weapons. And there was something in his voice, too, that made her tremble a little; there was a certain emphasis on the words "some more definitions."

"Don't!" she summoned up courage enough to say. "It isn't fair."

Although he tried to keep grave, the visitor was obliged to laugh.

"There is no book on domestic economy," he remarked, "which is more in a woman's line than such treatises as these. But my uncle believes that you require no instruction on that subject; he thinks you are mistress of that, and, accepting his opinion, I have decided to ask for the post of examiner."

Violet shot a swift glance at him, and the look she saw in his eyes made her tremble still more. She tried to retreat, and asked herself indignantly where Ada had gone to; but there was no retreat, for the visitor now held her hand.

"Violet, there is one other word the meaning of which I must explain to you—at least, its meaning to me! Can you not guess what that word is? Do you know what I meant by the post of examiner?"

"No, no! I don't want to know. I——"

"You know without being told? Then that will save me some trouble!"

"I didn't mean that——" began Violet, some of her old defiance returning.

But she had no opportunity of completing the sentence; that defiant glance of hers had been too much for Laurence Jordan and he clasped her in his arms. A woman likes a masterful lover, and Violet surrendered without further struggle.

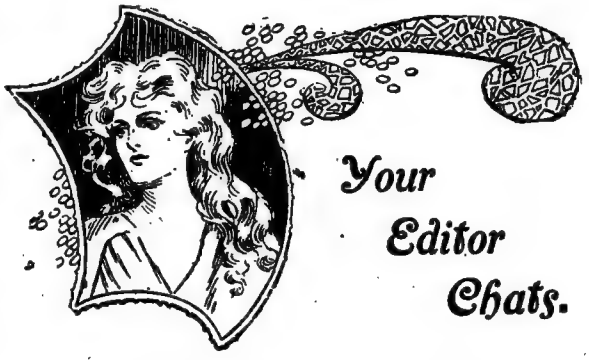
"Do you know the definition of 'love,' dearest?" he asked tenderly.

"Cheek!" exclaimed Violet saucily.

"Well, the lady's cheek has a good deal to do with it, and so have her lips!" was the quick rejoinder.

And he had just time to snatch a kiss before Ada entered. Then Violet, forgetting her previous indignation at her cousin's absence, inwardly wondered why people are always in the way when you don't want them.

Geo. Day.



Your Editor Chats.

Now or Never!

On page 491 appears the concluding set of six signatures in our fascinating competition. Aren't you making an attempt to win the £10 or one of the other cash prizes offered? You have quite as good an opportunity as anyone else to become a successful competitor. Look carefully at the signatures and see if you cannot decipher them. Even if one or two floor you that is no reason why you should not enter.

The preceding five sets can still be obtained through any newsagent or direct from this office. Make up your mind to have a good try for that £10 *now*, or it may be too late.

"Brian Cresswell's Choice."

You will all agree with me that the Eleventh Problem, which appears on page 492 is an extremely interesting one.

What should you advise Brian Cresswell to do?

I will award a prize of one guinea to the reader who sends in what I consider to be the best advice to him under the circumstances related in the story. Reasons for his advice must be stated clearly, but should not exceed one hundred words. Replies must be written on one side of the paper only, in legible handwriting. My decision as to the winner will be final. Address your envelopes to "The Editor, *Short Stories*, Pearson's Buildings, Henrietta Street, London, W.C.," and mark them "Eleventh Love Problem," in the top left-hand corner. All letters must reach these offices by Friday, April 23rd.

"Phantom Shadows."

I hope that you are reading "Phantom Shadows." It is much too good a story to be missed. If you have not already started reading it, do so at once. You can quite easily pick up the thread of the story from the complete summary that is given. Week by week "Phantom Shadows" will grow more and more interesting.

A Hulme Reader Wins a Guinea.

I consider that Miss Marion Wadsworth, of 8 Lever Street, Hulme, Manchester, sent in the most sensible advice to Owen Rhys, the hero of the tenth Unsolved Love Problem, and I therefore award to that lady the guinea I offered.

Your Editor.

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Myra Brockley's Joke.

The Story of a Forged Cheque.

THURSDAY was market-day at Burwell, and on that day much business was commonly transacted in the town, the banks being kept open an hour later than usual in consequence. But on the last Thursday in July two events were in progress, each of which, in its own way, interfered with the ordinary course of affairs. The annual flower show was held in Mr. Rodwell's grounds, just outside the town, and a meeting of the creditors of Messrs. Hall and Whitehead, bankrupts, was called for the same afternoon, and necessitated the presence of Mr. Brockley, manager of the Burwell branch of the Burfordshire Banking Company.

This last circumstance caused George Hervey, the cashier, to be alone at the bank counter for upwards of an hour. Business, however, was slack, and nothing noteworthy occurred till a few minutes before closing time, when a young man entered the office and presented a cheque for payment. The cheque was drawn in favour of George Duncan or order; it was signed by one of the principal customers of the bank and was duly indorsed "Geo. Duncan" in a bold, masculine hand. The amount of the draft was £50.

One of the qualities most essential to the success of a bank clerk, as of a detective, is the power of noting every peculiarity of the persons who come before him in the way of business, without appearing to observe them.

All that the presenter of the cheque saw was that the cashier took the slip of paper, read it rapidly, glanced at the back to see the indorsement, and stuck it on the file before him, barely raising his eyes to ask, in careless tones, the usual question, "How will you take it?" before beginning to shovel out the gold. But in those few seconds George had taken stock of his customer—a clergyman and a gentleman, evidently; though but for his clerical hat and overcoat—which last-named article of apparel struck George as being inconveniently heavy for a fine summer day—he would have looked too young to be in Orders.

George pushed the sovereigns across the counter in the rapid, matter-of-fact manner affected by bank clerks, who appear anxious to impress upon the public that they are so familiarised with the touch and sight of these coins, as to be quite indifferent whether they pay them away in fives or in thousands.

The young man who brought the cheque seemed less accustomed to the handling of money. He counted it slowly, and picked up the pieces with some difficulty. His gloves appeared to be too large for his hands, and to impede the free use of his fingers.

"Allow me," said the cashier, picking up the coins and counting them into the clergyman's hands. A passing feeling of wonder as to who his customer was crossed his mind, together with a sense that his face was not unfamiliar to him, though he could not recollect when or where he had seen it.

As the young clergyman left the bank a fussy old lady entered, and demanded her pass-book, with a long explanation of why she wanted it. George answered her absently, following the movements of the departing stranger with his eye. As the latter reached the door, George observed that he wore a pair of dress trousers, the ends of which just showed below his overcoat.

"Been to a funeral, probably," he thought. "That accounts for the great coat to hide his black suit," and he thought no more of the matter till it was time to shut out the public for the day. He fastened the outer door of the bank and returned to his desk, pausing idly on his way to glance out of the bow window. As he did so his eye was caught by the figure of the stranger, returning rapidly towards the bank, and he lingered a moment to see if he wished to re-enter the office or would merely pass on his way. He did neither; but on reaching the side door that led to the manager's private rooms, turned and passed quickly in, having apparently either found the door ajar or used a latchkey.

"A friend of Brockley's, evidently. Where can I have seen him?"

But the question was not worth thought, and George plunged into his work with the intent of getting it over as quickly as possible.

Before he had half finished Mr. Brockley returned, with the preoccupied air of a man who had just heard serious or unexpected news.

"Awful thing!" he exclaimed. "Poor Hammerton was found dead in his bed this morning!"

"Hammerton! Which Hammerton?" asked George, shocked and bewildered.

"Old Peter Hammerton, the father. Went to bed all right last night, and was found dead by his servant this morning. Must have had a fit, they think."

"But," returned George, incredulously, "I have just cashed a cheque of his, dated this very day."

"You have! Where is it? Who presented it?"

George found the cheque, and placed it in the manager's hands.

"Here it is, made out, as you see, to George Duncan. I do not know if that is the name of the man who cashed it, for it was indorsed before he presented it, and I do not know that I have ever seen him before. A clergyman; young, short, and fair—certainly a gentleman, and, seemingly, a friend of yours. At least he went into your house about half an hour ago."

Without a word Mr. Brockley turned and went into the house. All the rooms seemed empty. He rang the dining-room bell.

"Who has called here this afternoon?" he asked of the servant who answered it.

"No one, sir."

"No one? Think again. Has no gentleman been here?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir, except Mr. Stevens. He came back from the show just about four o'clock, and ran upstairs quickly, as though he had forgotten something and came back to fetch it."

"See if he is in his room now, and ask him to speak to me."

"I know he is not, sir. I have just come past his room and it was quite empty. He must have gone out again. I see he has left his great coat behind him. He had it on when

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he came in, but I suppose he found it too warm for such a day as this. I was surprised to see him in it."

"Did you let him in?"

"No. He must have borrowed missus' latchkey. I was coming out of the pantry, and just as I opened the door I saw Mr. Stevens come in at the front. He ran upstairs, without stopping to take off his hat or coat. I looked to see that he had made the door fast, and then went down to the kitchen, and saw no more of him. I don't know when he went out."

"You are sure no one else has been in?"

"Not that I know of. No one could have come in without a latchkey, unless I had let them in; and I have not answered the door this afternoon, except to the milkman, and he comes the back way."

"Of course. Well, never mind. That is all I want to know." And Mr. Brockley returned to the office.

"How was the clergyman dressed?" he asked the cashier.

"In an overcoat, dress trousers, and a rather worn felt hat. He spoke as though he had a cold. I fancied he must have been to a funeral; partly because of the trousers, and partly because he was wearing a pair of black gloves, two sizes too large for him. There seemed to me something familiar about his face, though I could not say where I had seen it. I should know him again in a moment."

"Miss Brockley," he said, "have you ever seen this cheque before?"

"And you are sure that he went into my house?"

"Quite sure. I saw him from the window, just as I had shut the door, and I watched for a moment, thinking he was coming back to the bank, but he stopped at your door and went in."

The manager took up the cheque, and examined it again.

"Are you sure that your news is true?" asked George. "The ink of the signature looks very fresh, and the date is certainly to-day."

"There is no doubt about my news. I have seen the doctor who was called in. If this cheque is genuine, it must have been drawn yesterday."

"Genuine! You don't doubt that, do you? People often do make a mistake in the day of the month; or Hammerton might have post-dated it intentionally."

"He might, of course," returned the manager; "and the signature is like his, only a little shaky."

"If he had a fit coming on, his hand would be likely to be unsteady," said George.

"No doubt. Still, Hammerton was the most accurate of men, and if he put a date not that of the day on which he wrote, he did it on purpose; but I suppose we shall have no trouble about it with the executors."

"I never thought of that. How does the law stand in such a case?"

"Can't tell offhand. I will ask Manners to-morrow. Let us get on now with the books."

"I cashed three other cheques of Hammerton's to-day," persisted George, "but they were all some days old. By the way, did he have a new cheque-book within the last few days? These three did not come from the same book as the last one. There is a difference of nearly two thousand in the numbers."

Mr. Brockley turned to his records.

"No," he said. "The last we sold him for his private account was more than a week ago—C. 38,151 to C. 38,200."

"And this cheque is C. 36,275. But, after all, that proves nothing. He may have borrowed a blank cheque."

"Just so. Let us get on."

It seemed to George that the manager, for some reason, did not wish to pursue the investigation; or that he had in his mind some other plan for discovering the mystery. The two men worked on without further remark.

When they had finished, Mr. Brockley said: "You are going to the show?"

"Yes; I promised my mother to meet her there."

"My wife and daughter are there. Let us walk together."

George assented. The walk was silent; the minds of both men were preoccupied, George thinking chiefly of the disagreeable uncertainty about the cheque, and Mr. Brockley feeling painfully the sudden disappearance of a well-known figure in Burwell life.

The two men walked quickly and somewhat absently through the tents, which were now becoming too crowded to be pleasant places to linger in; and having accomplished this duty, they turned towards the private part of the grounds, where Mrs. Rodwell was entertaining her friends amongst the company with tea and tennis.

Just inside the gate that divided the lawn from the field, George grasped Mr. Brockley's arm.

"There's the man who cashed the cheque! That young fellow talking to Mrs. Merton; but he has changed his hat and his trousers."

"Nonsense! That's my nephew, Jack Stevens, who came to us last night, for a flying visit, on his way to his new curacy. If he had wanted to cash a cheque he would have done it in the morning, and not come away from the flower show for it."

But even while he spoke, Mr. Brockley remembered the maid's testimony, that his nephew had returned home, for some purpose or other, and that her account of his dress agreed with George's description of that of his unknown customer, who was, moreover, said to have gone into his

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(Mr. Brockley's) house after leaving the bank. It was odd, certainly. How could Jack have got hold of a cheque of Hammerton's? There was one comfort, however, if Jack had anything to do with the matter, there could be nothing wrong about it.

But while Mr. Brockley was thinking thus, George was eyeing the young clergyman attentively, and doubts of his identity with the holder of the cheque began to creep into his mind. Had the man who brought the cheque got a moustache. Jack Stevens had — very light, but distinctly visible; whilst, so far as he could recollect, the face of the other was either quite smooth or clean shaven. But though this was his impression, he could not feel certain upon the point.

He made a point of speaking to Mr. Stevens, and grew more puzzled each minute. If this was the man whom he had seen in the bank, the reason why his face had seemed so familiar to him was clear enough. There was a striking family likeness between the curate and his cousin Myra, and George now saw a certain resemblance to his uncle also. The strange thing was that he had not known at once of whom his customer reminded him. But though Jack Stevens was young looking, he was not so absurdly young looking as he had fancied in the afternoon. The absence of moustache would, no doubt, make him look still younger. Was it possible that his moustache was false, and put on when his dress was changed?

At this moment Mr. Brockley strolled up.

"So you grew tired of the show, Jack, and came home in the middle?" he said.

"I?" returned his nephew. "No, I have been here all the afternoon. Myra went home to fetch her racquet, but she would not let me go with her."

"No," said Myra; "you were wanted here to play tennis with the Harcourt girls."

"And you really have not left the grounds?" repeated Mr. Brockley.

"Not since I came with Aunt, at half-past two."

"Curious," said his uncle. "Hervey here says he saw you in the bank, and Jane says you came into the house about four o'clock and ran upstairs while she was in the hall."

"I must be one of the unfortunate people with a double, then, for I have not been in either place this afternoon."

Myra laughed nervously.

"Better write an account to the Society for Psychical Research, papa. It seems a ghostly mystery; quite in their line."

"Or make a detective story of it," said the clergyman.

George Hervey felt uncomfortable. He was gradually becoming convinced that Mr. Stevens was *not* the man who had presented the cheque; and with the conviction, the impression that the writing of the draft was too fresh to have been traced more than a few hours before it came into his hands became deepened. He took the manager aside, and expressed his uneasiness.

The bank party left the show early. As soon as George and his mother found themselves alone in their lodgings the latter exclaimed:

"George, such a strange thing has happened! I have lost a cheque out of my book. Look here!"

George took the cheque-book that his mother offered him and saw that the counterfoil of the last cheque torn out was blank. He also saw that the blank counterfoil bore the number of the mysterious draft presented at the bank that afternoon: C. 36,275.

He started.

"When did you find this out, mother?"

"Just before I went out this afternoon. I was making up my accounts, and on looking, to be sure that I had not forgotten to enter any payment I had made by cheque, I saw that one cheque was gone."

"You are quite sure that you did not use it?"

"Quite. The last cheque I drew was on Tuesday. Mrs. Bryant came up to say that the collector for the Gas Company had called with their account, and as there were two quarters owing, the company threatened to cut off the gas if it was not settled at once. She had not quite enough money in the house to pay it, and asked if I would mind advancing a week's rent. Of course, I said that I would, as it would be due the next day, and then I found I had no money in my purse. Mrs. Bryant said that if I would write a cheque for the amount of the gas company's bill, she could give me change for the difference between that and the rent, and I did as she asked. Here is the counterfoil, 'Burwell Gas Co., £2 3s. 4d.' I am quite positive that that is the last cheque I drew. You gave me five pounds next day to go on with, you know."

"Was anyone in the room when you drew the cheque besides Mrs. Bryant?"

"Only Myra Brockley. She had been making a sketch of the old church out of our window, you know, and she was in the back room going on with it then."

"Myra Brockley! Think what you are saying, mother!" and George looked so startled and shocked as to astonish his mother.

She laughed.

"My dear George," she said, "I did not accuse Myra of taking the cheque. I only said she was in the room when I had the book out last. Why should she not be there? She was most innocently employed, I am sure."

George made an effort to recover his self-possession. He was horrified at the suspicion that had suggested itself to his mind, and would not for the world that his mother should guess at it.

"Most innocently, of course," he said. "But, mother, you must let me show this book to the manager."

"What in the world for? What business is it of his?"

"In all banking affairs, it is best to be on the safe side. Someone might pick up the cheque and use it who had no right to do so," and he hurried out of the room, giving his mother no time to ask further questions.

George walked as rapidly as he could to the manager's house, in the hope of being able to find Mr. Brockley before he should have gone out to prosecute the further inquiries he had expressed his intention of making that evening.

He was too late. The servant told him that Mr. Brockley had been gone for at least a quarter of an hour. He told her that he would await her master in his private room, and begged her to inform Mr. Brockley of his presence the moment he returned.

The time wore slowly on, and George's impatience and anxiety increased with every minute. When Mr. Brockley at last returned, he was accompanied by a detective.

"I am glad to see you, Hervey," said the manager, as he entered the room. "I am afraid there is no doubt that the cheque is a forgery; and the man that you and Jane took for Jack Stevens was clearly not he. Will you kindly give this officer an accurate description of the man as you saw him in the bank, and of his movements afterwards, so far as you observed them?"

"Will you let me speak to you alone first, Mr. Brockley? I have grave reasons for asking it."

Mr. Brockley hesitated. The more quickly the matter was investigated, and the police put on the track of the forger, the better. "Could not George's business wait until afterwards?"

But George was urgent, and the manager yielded, more because it seemed quicker to yield than to argue, than for any other reason.

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As soon as the detective had retired, George began at once: "Mr. Brockley, I came to-night to ask you to make no further inquiries into this matter. The error was mine in accepting a forged cheque. If I had known of Mr. Hammerton's death I should have refused it unhesitatingly, for I was, and am, convinced that it was freshly written when it was presented for payment. I will refund the fifty pounds to the bank, and I beg you most earnestly to let the matter rest."

Mr. Brockley stared.

"Let it rest?" he exclaimed. "Make no effort to trace a forgery? Do you know that what you are asking is something very like compounding a felony?"

"I do not know what it may be in law; but if you persist you will repent it to your dying day. Mr. Brockley, I implore you to listen to me!"

"I could not, if I would, now; for I have already informed the police, and telegraphed for one of the directors to come down. The matter is out of my hands."

"Then, Mr. Brockley, I can only tell you the facts that I wished, if it might be, to keep from you. You have been a true friend to me, and I would be the last to cause you suffering, if I could help it. Mr. Brockley, have you ever noticed the extraordinary likeness between your daughter and her cousin?"

"Are you mad, Hervey, or trifling with me to gain time? What has nonsense of this kind to do with the forged cheque, I should like to know?"

"I told you that the man who cashed the cheque so closely resembled Mr. Stevens that at first sight I took Mr. Stevens for him. It was only close observation that convinced me that Mr. Stevens was older looking than the other, and wore a moustache, while the other did not. I believe now that the person I took for Mr. Stevens was a girl in disguise. Stop a moment," for Mr. Brockley interrupted him with an indignant exclamation. "I have, I am sorry to say, further evidence. This cheque-book is my mother's. You will perceive that there is a cheque gone, with no record of its use on the counterfoil. Look at the number of that cheque."

Mr. Brockley did so, and started.

"My mother says that she never used it. The last cheque she drew was the previous one, in favour of the Burwell Gas Company, which she drew at the request of Mrs. Bryant, our landlady. While she had the book out only two persons, besides herself, were in the room, Mrs. Bryant and Miss Brockley. My mother did not open the cheque-book again until this afternoon, shortly before starting for the flower show. She then saw that a cheque was missing."

Mr. Brockley's face had exhibited a variety of expressions during this speech: impatience, astonishment, indignation, and, finally, contempt. Without a word in reply, he opened the the door, and recalled the detective.

"Mr. Coomber," she said, "our task will be easier than I expected. Mr. Hervey has practically incriminated himself. He comes to intreat me to stop the investigation, offers to pay up the fifty pounds, which as yet, he has of course, not had time to spend, produces his mother's book to prove that the forged cheque was torn out of it, and then coolly tries to stop my mouth by throwing suspicion upon my daughter, because, forsooth, she was in the room when Mrs. Hervey drew some other cheque. On his own admission, the cheque comes from his house, he cashes it when he is alone in the bank, and then makes up a cock and bull story that it was presented by an unknown clergyman, closely resembling my nephew, but really a girl in disguise. I think we can make a fair guess at the real culprit. I give Mr. George Hervey into your hands on a charge of forgery."

"I am afraid I cannot arrest Mr. Hervey without a warrant," said the police officer. "And if you will excuse me, Mr. Brockley, I would recommend you to pause a moment before applying for one. I understand that part at least of Mr. Hervey's evidence is corroborated by your servant; and before I left the office I saw Constable Gregson, who was on this beat to-day, and he says that about 3.45 this afternoon, or, maybe, 3.50, as he was walking up on the other side of the street, he saw a clerical-looking young gentleman come out of the bank. He noticed the overcoat, and dress-trousers, and passed much the same remarks in his mind as did Mr. Hervey."

"Then I suppose you think that this young clergyman went first to Mrs. Hervey's desk and stole a blank cheque, do you, Mr. Coomber?"

"I said, 'a clerical-looking young gentleman,' Mr. Brockley. Constable Gregson did not ask to see his Letters of Orders, nor, as far as I understand, did Mr. Hervey," and the detective smiled a complacent smile at his own pleasantry. "If you have no objection, Mr. Hervey," he continued, after a moment's pause, during which neither of his hearers seemed disposed to reflect his smile, "I should like to hear your reasons for assuming this person to be a woman."

"I do not intend to say anything further at present. My late remarks were intended only for Mr. Brockley's private ear."

"You are wise not to incriminate yourself further, Hervey. I am truly sorry for you, and will do what I can to incline the directors to mercy; but, to my mind, I fear no further doubt is possible. I could have forgiven everything but the dastardly attempt to shift suspicion from yourself to my daughter. Coomber, I shall hold you responsible for Mr. Hervey's safe production to-morrow."

"I will walk home with Mr. Hervey, and let one of our men watch his house till he is safely in the bank to-morrow."

"I have endeavoured to save you pain, Mr. Brockley," said Hervey, with some emotion. "And I hold to my offer. I am responsible for cashing the cheque, and I will make the loss good."

"Further words are an insult, sir. Coomber, see to your prisoner."

Hervey bowed and left the room, Coomber following him closely.

But all the detective's efforts could not induce him to utter another word with regard to the occurrences of the afternoon.

On the following morning, before Mr. Brockley's usual breakfast hour, a knock at the front door announced the arrival of the expected director, who had travelled by a night train. By the time that the meal was on the table, the new-comer was in full possession of Mr. Brockley's views on the matter of the cheque; before it was well over, Coomber was once more upon the scene, and had given his version of the facts and the conclusions to which they pointed.

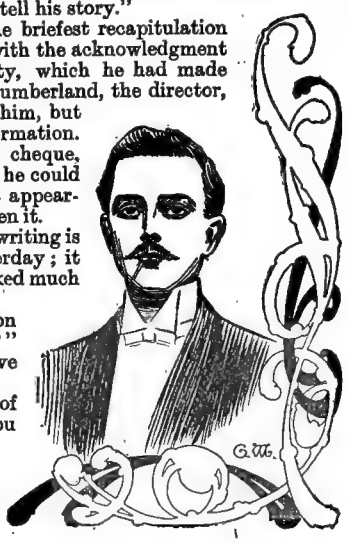
"Is Mr. Hervey safe?" asked the manager, impatiently.

"Walked up with me, and is waiting downstairs with Mrs. Hervey," replied the detective curtly.

The director looked at his watch.

"We have an hour before the bank opens," he said. "Let Mr. Hervey come in and tell his story."

George's story was the briefest recapitulation of the facts, and ended with the acknowledgment of his own responsibility, which he had made the night before. Mr. Cumberland, the director, put a few questions to him, but elicited no fresh information. At last he displayed the cheque, and asked the cashier if he could detect any change in its appearance since he had first seen it.



"Yes, the ink of the writing is blacker than it was yesterday; it had a blue tint, and looked much fresher."

"Did Mr. Hammerton ever use blue-black ink?"

"I do not know. I have not observed."

"You were ignorant of his death at the time you cashed this?"

"Of course; or I should have refused payment until I had been able to consult Mr. Brockley."

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Mrs. Hervey spoke to the loss of the blank cheque, and then the detective said:

"I have sent a man down to make inquiries at the gas collector's office to discover through whose hands Mrs. Hervey's cheque passed. My belief is that she tore off the two together, and handed them both over to Mrs. Bryant."

Mr. Stevens was then produced, and Jane, the housemaid, who protested that if the man she had seen was not Mr. Stevens, it must have been his ghost. Constable Gregson was of opinion that the clerical gentleman he had seen coming out of the bank was younger and of slighter build than Mr. Stevens, and George was inclined to believe that he wore no moustache; though he seemed less confident on this point than he had been on the previous day.

The director then asked to see the ladies of Mr. Brockley's family. The manager consented to the demand, but haughtily declared that the proceeding was wholly uncalled for.

Mrs. Brockley and Myra had been kept in absolute ignorance of the events and suspicions of the last twenty-four hours. Mr. Cumberland's presence at the breakfast table had told them that some business of importance was on foot, but they were accustomed to make no inquiries as to the affairs of the bank, and had not concerned themselves in any way about the present business. Great, therefore, was their surprise at being summoned to a conference in the bank-parlour.

Mr. Cumberland went to the point at once.

"Miss Brockley," he said, handing Myra the cheque, "have you ever seen this before?"

The colour rushed to her face, and the police officer interrupted quickly:

"It is my duty to warn you, miss, that anything you say——"

But Myra broke in hastily. "What is the matter? Is there anything wrong with the cheque? Is it not a good one?"

Both her father and Mr. Cumberland began to speak, but George interrupted them both.

"Whatever is wrong is my fault, Miss Brockley. I cashed it, and I am responsible to the bank. Please say nothing."

Myra looked from one to the other in evident distress and confusion, and her father said sternly:

"The cheque is forged, Myra. Mr. Hammerton was dead when it was drawn."

"Forged! Oh, papa, indeed—indeed, I did not know! How could I? I did not know Mr. Hammerton was dead till you told us at the show, and I never even looked at the signature on the cheque."

Her father's face became sterner still.

"What have you to do with it?" he asked.

Myra looked round, colouring more than ever.

"I will tell you all I know about it, papa. But may I not tell you alone?"

Mr. Brockley looked at the director, and he looked at the detective, who said:

"Just as you please, gentlemen. It is for you to proceed in this matter or not, as you see fit. But if I hear much more it may be my duty to step in."

Coomber had a regard for the young lady, and a grateful remembrance of kindness shown by her to his wife and children during a severe illness. He had no wish to take her into custody.

"You may withdraw, I think, Mr. Coomber," said the director. "But I fear, young lady, that I must hear your story."

Myra's story was soon told. Her likeness to her cousin was a standing family joke, and on the evening of Jack's arrival her mother had commented upon it afresh, and had laughingly said:

"I believe, Myra, that if you were to put on Jack's clothes no one would know you apart."

The idea had tickled her fancy, and on her return home to fetch her racquet on the following afternoon her eye had fallen on her cousin's coat and travelling hat hanging in the hall; she was seized with a sudden desire to dress herself in them and try the effect.

"I slipped off my dress and put on my habit?" she said; "looping up the skirt, so that it did not show under the coat, and when I looked at myself in the pier-glass I was so like Jack that I felt convinced no one could tell the difference. At this moment I heard a cry in the street, just under the window, and looking out, I saw that someone in the side street opposite our house had fallen heavily, and seemed unable to rise. A momentary impulse induced me—quite forgetting how I was dressed—to rush down and help him up; which accordingly I did.

"He said he had hurt his ankle, and could not walk for the moment. He would not have cared for this, but that he had to go to the Burfordshire Bank to cash a cheque, and was afraid he should be too late. If he could not get the money that afternoon it would be a great inconvenience to him in his business. He looked so distressed and worried that I was sorry for him. He said at last to me:

"'Would you be so very kind as to cash it?'

"I said at once, 'Give me the cheque, and I will get the money and bring it to you here.' It seemed to me a delicious joke actually to go into the bank and take in Mr. Hervey; and I had no idea of anything being wrong. I could hardly help laughing outright when Mr. Hervey took the cheque quite gravely, and gave me the money just as he would have done to any strange man. I took the money back to the man, called a cab for him, and helped him into it, and then I came home, and ran upstairs as fast as I could, for I saw Jane in the hall, and was afraid she would recognise me. I put on my dress again, and went back to the show, and found that neither mother nor Jack had noticed how long I had been away."

Mr. Brockley's astonishment as he listened to this avowal may readily be imagined. Mr. Cumberland could scarcely conceal his amusement; and George stood by, red and uncomfortable, feeling far more guilty than the narrator of the story, whose pleasure in her successful imposture seemed quite as great as her mortification at having been entrapped into active assistance in successful forgery. But when Mr. Cumberland made it plain that the matter could not be suffered to rest at this point, but that the forger must, if possible, be traced and punished, she began to regard the affair in a more serious light.

The first step—after sending Myra to the drawing-room, with orders not to leave the house in case her evidence should be again required—was to recall the police officer, and send him to pursue the clue furnished by Myra.

It is needless to go through all the steps by which the story was unravelled; suffice it to say, that the forger was found to be the son of the man by whom the bills due to the Gas Company were collected. The young man had betted heavily on a horse race, and had not the money to pay up.

In helping his father with his accounts during a few days' holiday at home, he discovered the blank cheque, folded up with one drawn by Mrs. Hervey. Amongst the cheques that were in his hands was one of Mr. Hammerton's. He knew Mr. Hammerton to be a rich man, likely to have a large balance at the bank, and he contrived to keep his cheque for a day or two, and practised the necessary imitation of his signature; but as he was taking the forged draft to the bank, he began to feel nervous lest he should be recognised, and his identity proved when the forgery should be discovered, as it was sure to be the next time Mr. Hammerton examined his pass-book.

He debated with himself how best to avoid the danger. The fall and the excuse were easily planned, and the success of the ruse was complete. He got off to Manchester, where he was employed as a clerk, but was traced, and confessed his guilt. His father, however, offered to repay the money. And in order to spare Miss Brockley the pain of appearing in the witness box—and, perhaps, with some idea that the affair would bring ridicule upon the bank if made public, Mr. Cumberland induced the other directors not to prosecute, but to be content with the recovery of the money.

W. Evans.

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In True Love's Eyes.

Relating How the Villain of the Piece Turned Hero.

"How can I go?" groaned Philip. "Oh, my darling, how can I leave you?"

It was a dark, raw day in late October. Splashes of rain blurred the windows of the drawing-room—dead leaves whirled by in gusts. On the beach, at the foot of the garden, the violet-black waves boomed ceaselessly.

Philip knelt at my side, his arm clasping my waist, his bonny, golden head crushing against the lace of my corsage. In an hour the *Scythia* would leave the Docks—further delay was impossible—the moment had arrived when we must "kiss and part."

"Great Heaven!" cried Philip, "why must my uncle fall ill in New York at this particular time—hardly more than two months before our appointed wedding-day—and cable me to his bedside? And why am I so poor that I dare not disregard his summons? Should he make a new will, you know, and leave his fortune to strangers, it would be very awkward for me. I go for your sake, Iris—I want to secure this fortune for you. Your friends do not look upon me with approval—they wonder how the beautiful Miss Daintree, with a score of lovers at her feet, can consent to marry a bank clerk——"

I put my hand upon his lips.

"Don't, Philip!"

"But it is true. There is Vaughan, with his inherited millions and long pedigree. A worldly-wise woman, Iris, would have turned her attention to him. To tell the truth, I have always felt a trifle jealous of Vaughan."

"Philip!" I cried, desperately, "these are our last moments together—will you waste them in talk like this? I have loved you poor—I can love you no better when you are rich. Indeed, I begin to hate your uncle's fortune, since it is that which calls you across the sea."

We clung together, shuddering.

"You will marry me when I come back, Iris?"

"If you return," I faltered.

"My uncle can only last a few days. No earthly power shall keep me more than a month. Ah! my best conception of Heaven," with an accession of gloom, "is a place where there are no partings! Darling, darling! Stop crying, or I cannot go at all."

"Don't mind me," I gasped, "I was never a heroine. If you do not hurry," and I pointed to the clock on the mantel, "the *Scythia* will sail without you. Oh, why prolong our misery, Philip? Say 'Good-bye' at once."

He turned my face upward in the dull-grey light.

"Good-bye, marvellous eyes!" emphasising every word with a devouring kiss—"good-bye, sweetest mouth that lover ever pressed—my beautiful queen, good-bye! Mind you don't flirt with Vaughan in my absence—I couldn't bear that, you know."

He tore himself from my arms, but turned back to cry: "Kiss me once—once more, Iris!"

Another embrace, heart strained to heart, then the door closed like a coffin lid, shutting life out and death in. He was gone down the long garden walk—my fair Viking, my lover! I fell on my knees, alone in the silent drawing-room, wild sobs shaking my body, wild prayers crowding to my lips.

"Oh, Heaven! Heaven! Bring him back to me in safety. There are so many things in the world that threaten happiness. I am very weak—I am full of forebodings of evil. Help me—help me, or I cannot endure it!"

A door opened—a limping step crossed the floor suddenly, someone bent over me, and with a sharp exclamation snatched me to my feet.

"This is cruel!" said a voice. "No living man is worthy of such tears, Iris! Hush! for Heaven's sake!"

Through a wet blurr I saw him standing beside me, frowning savagely—a lean, dark man, fastidious in dress, distinguished in bearing, and with cold, melancholy eyes, darkened by some violent emotion.

"How rude of you to intrude upon me here!" I said, bitterly; "and—how like you, Mr. Vaughan!"

He winced. He was a distant relative—so distant, indeed, that the tie of blood was never mentioned between us. His halting step was due to an accident, of which I was the cause. In my childhood he had rescued me from great peril, and by so doing injured himself for life.

"I meant no intrusion," he answered, with composure. "I was looking for your aunt. So Philip has taken his departure? Well," with a sneer, "he will return."

"How can one be sure of that?" I answered dismally. "The steamer may sink."

"It is a Cunarder."

"He may die in one of those dreadful American towns."

"His health is good."

"His uncle may keep him indefinitely."

"That's not Philip's luck. He is a favourite of the gods. No, he will come back, and bring a fortune to recompense you for the tears you are shedding to-day."

"I do not care for the money," I pouted. "I love him well enough without it."

His dark face grew alarmingly white.

"When you talk in that way I cannot listen," he hissed; "you sicken me!"

"I do not want you to talk at all!" I answered sharply. "It would be good taste on your part to leave me to myself

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You will find my aunt upstairs." And I walked away to the window.

"Iris!"

The halting step had followed me to the window. I felt his hot breath stirring my hair—the fixed gaze of his intolerable eyes. He was trying to hum some lines of a song:

"*I'll tell thee a part*
Of the thoughts that start
To being when thou art nigh."

But his voice broke suddenly.

"Iris, there are things that I cannot stand. You know, for instance, when you talk of your love for Philip, a knife seems turning in my heart. No, you need not look at me with that forbidding air. I will not keep silent longer! I will out with the whole truth. I love you! Oh, Heaven! I cannot remember the time when I did not love you, Iris—when I was not ready to lie in the dust and let you walk over me. Your lover I have always been—secretly or openly—always your lover! And, as Heaven is my witness, I believe I might have won you but for Philip."

My wrath blazed high.

"Are you lost to all sense of propriety and honour," I said, "that you talk to me in this fashion? Have you not been told that I am to marry Philip when he comes back?"

His lean, olive face was full of bitter defiance.

"When the floods are out, Iris, such small barriers as propriety and honour must go down before them."

"You know," I panted, "you know that I belong to Philip!"

His pinched, grey look frightened me.

"Yes," he answered, with a ghastly smile. "I would tear you from him, if I could; but," making a gesture of despair, "I cannot—I cannot!"

An angry answer rose to my lips, but something held it back—the thought of a night, far away in the past, when a child, in the delirium of fever, I had escaped from a careless nurse, and leapt from a window of this same house out on a projecting roof, icy with winter sleet. I remembered how no servant, and not even my aunt, had dared attempt my rescue, fearful that I might, if pursued, precipitate myself to the earth below—how Noel Vaughan, a mere stripling, and agile as a cat, had dashed upon the roof, secured and placed me in the servant's reach, and then, missing his own foothold, had fallen headlong, and sustained the injuries that maimed him for life.

"I see," he said, with a sudden change of manner, "all this distresses you, Iris. I am a precious fool—forget what I have said. If I suffer, no one shall be the wiser. I will come to your wedding; I would promise to dance thereat, if," glancing at his injured limb, "dancing was in my line. See those boats out there in the rain—notice the fishermen. Picturesque enough for the Bay of Naples, are they not? They would drown if they were not amphibious by nature. I will not wait to see your aunt to-day."

The next moment he was gone. I stood alone by the window, feeling as though a suffocating wind had blown upon me.

My aunt had guests at dinner that night. While my French maid was dressing me, I sat staring absently into the silver-white, tossing seas, bearing Philip farther and farther from me every moment.

Marie gathered my bronze hair to the top of my head, and pinned it there with a golden comb; gowned me in a dress of a dull-pink hue; like a crushed rose; fastened my waist in a jewelled belt, and pinned a great knot of half-blown tea roses in my corsage.

"Oh," she said softly, "mademoiselle is as lovely as an angel!"

I went down to the drawing-room.

All the guests save one were assembled there. My aunt whispered in my ear:

"Dear me! Noel has just sent a note of excuse, and now we must sit down to table with that unlucky number, thirteen. Well, thank Heaven, I am not superstitious!"

I was placed beside a popluar M.P.—a smiling, rotund person, very fond of hearing himself talk.

"It's a pity Vaughan is growing so cynical," he said to me in a confidential tone. "He has no feeling whatever for your sex—never looks twice at any woman." I remembered the scene in the drawing-room, and felt myself colouring hotly. "Perhaps the belles have pursued him a little too closely. With his wealth and position he is a desirable *parti*; and his lameness—well, that was incurred in a manner so praiseworthy"—and he beamed benevolently on me—"that all women ought to find it an additional attraction."

I had no more interest in Noel at that moment than in Saturn and his rings, but I smiled vaguely, and answered:

"Oh, yes!"

"Philip St. Mark sailed to-day, eh?" continued my neighbour. "I hope his journey may not prove altogether fruitless. I know that uncle—an eccentric party, mad over a hundred and one schemes for suppressing the evils of the times. Upon my soul, he is not likely to leave much money to Philip."

I did not express the dismay which I felt. One need not be surprised to hear unpleasant things at a dinner-party of thirteen. Coffee was served in the drawing-room, and somebody played the piano, and then the guests departed.

"I fear," said my aunt, settling herself comfortably in an easy chair, "that the dining-room was too warm, Iris, and the sherry not properly cooled. Dear, dear, you have looked all the evening like a ghost, child. A voyage across the Atlantic in these days is nothing——"

A sharp, sputtering sound interrupted her. On a buhl table by her side, a lamp was flaring oddly—perhaps in a draught of air. I stepped forward to adjust it. As I lifted the shade of rose silk, it flashed and shrivelled in my hold—a whirl of scorching crimson leapt full in my face, stinging like a swarm of bees. The lamp exploded. In an instant I stood, sheeted, like a martyr, in fire.

With terrified shrieks my aunt snatched the rugs from the floor and wrapped them round me. Instantly the servants were on the spot. Through the puffs of grey smoke which filled the room, I saw pale, scared faces appearing and receding, saw my dinner-dress dropping from my body in curious black flakes, the scorched tea roses with it. Then a blood-red mist gathered before my eyes—I was writhing in excruciating torture; the drawing-room—nay, the whole world, seemed in some state of horrible upheaval. My aunt, and a surgeon who had been summoned, wrapped something about me, and I was carried up the stairs to my own chamber.

* * * * *

"Oh, Heavens! She is burnt!" I heard Marie, the maid, say.

"Hold me, somebody," my aunt answered, like one on the verge of distraction. "I cannot look at her—it is not Iris—that blackened thing! Take me away, or I shall faint!"

"A blackened thing!"—that was what she called me. The beauty which had been my pride, my power, my glory, which men had worshipped and women envied—where was it now? Gone in a breath of red flame. Then I thought of Philip, and prayed to die.

Some soothing drug was given me, that for a time deadened physical suffering. Yet I knew that Marie was still sobbing at the foot of my bed.

"Ah, the marvellous beauty—it is lost, it is destroyed! And the lover on the sea—what will he say?"

Dark days followed. In spite of my aunt's protests, I secured a hand mirror, lifted it to the level of my face, looked once, and flung it from me with a heart-broken cry.

"Oh, Heaven! What have I done," I said, "that such punishment should fall upon me? Shut the light away, aunt; hide me from all eyes; let no one look upon me again!"

My aunt, shuddering, pressed me to her heart.

"Your life is spared, Iris—be thankful for that."

"Thankful that I have outlived my beauty? No, no—you ask too much! Stop all preparations for my marriage, and write immediately to Philip, and—tell him—tell him that

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I am disfigured past recognition—I release him from his engagement—from this moment he is free."

Weeping bitter tears, my aunt wrote as I dictated. Then a great shadow fell on the old house. All joyful preparations were at an end there. Mourning had taken the place of joy; despair of happiness. I felt dazed, annihilated, by the sudden blow. Of my rich ropes of bronze hair, only a short crop, like a boy's, remained. I walked again through the old familiar rooms, but the servants had taken care to remove every mirror from the walls, and the very reflection of my own figure on the polished woodwork made me hysterical.

I recall but one pleasant memory of that dreary time; day after day my aunt brought to me great baskets of orchids, and violets, lilies, and roses of every hue, silently heaping the bloom and fragrance before me, until I at last said:

"Does our conservatory yield all these flowers, aunt?"

She shook her head.

"Mr. Vaughan sends them. He has tried very hard to see you, but I told him you absolutely refused to receive visitors."

"Quite right," I answered, "the Iris whom he knew is dead." And I buried my face in the roses, and hot tears dropped on their pink petals.

At last came a letter from Philip. I fled with it to the solitude of my own room, and in fear and trembling broke the seal. He was wild with grief at my misfortune, and refused—absolutely refused—to break the engagement. If my beauty was marred he would love me with redoubled ardour. The preparations for the wedding must be continued. His uncle was in a dying condition, and would not permit his nephew to leave him for a moment, therefore, he could not fly to me; as his heart dictated; but as soon as release was possible, he would return and kiss away my tears.

The letter dropped from my nerveless hands. He meant it all—yes, I was quite sure that Philip was sincere in those tender assurances; but did he understand the magnitude of my misfortune? I remembered his ardent love for beauty, his antipathy to everything unsightly, repulsive.

"When we stand face to face again," I said to myself, "when he sees me as I am—will he still talk about keeping his engagement, or insist upon our marriage?"

Assailed by intolerable doubts, and unable longer to breathe indoors, I sallied forth upon the beach at the foot of the garden, and there began to pace aimlessly about in the ashen November twilight. Westward the moon shone, jewel-like on a sky of smoky crimson. I felt the soft, cool sands under my feet, the briny breath of the sea on my cheek, a rush of new life in my veins. And presently I heard a familiar voice calling my name: "Iris! Iris!"

He had espied me from afar, and was now hurrying over the beach to meet me. To escape was impossible. I stood quite still, and suffered him to approach. When he was within hand's reach, I flung back the veil from my face. He looked at me steadily. Neither by sound nor sign did he betray the shock which he must have felt. Limping a step nearer he extended both hands.

"Thank Heaven!" he cried, in a voice tremulous with strong joy.

"And why?" I queried bitterly.

"You live—you have regained health and strength. All is well with you again, Iris."

"All is well with me? You talk like a madman, Noel."

"I am mad—with the delight of seeing you once more. I could not batter down the walls of the house, you know, nor reach you by any fair means, and all the while I feared you might die."

"Why, I have prayed for death!" I answered sharply. "And, as you see, in vain. To the few who really seek it, it comes slowly."

"Don't talk like that!" he cried. "You have grown morbid with much suffering, Iris. What is this rubbish about releasing Philip from his engagement? He will not be released. By Heaven, I should long to shoot him if he would! Stop thinking improbable things. True love is eternal—deathless—not a matter to be affected by trifles——"

"Look at me, Noel."

"I am looking. You are as you have always been—incomparable. Your beauty is as deathless as love—fire could not injure it—it has not suffered. I see no change in you, Iris—none whatever."

"You must be beside yourself!"

"The man who loves you once will love you for ever. He is a good fellow—that Philip"—cheerfully. "He is made of the right stuff."

I was dumb with amazement. Then my heart gave a bound. Because Noel, my rejected suitor, could look upon me with composure; because I did not horrify or even startle him, I seemed to grasp and hold again a little of life—of the glad, sweet world—of love, even. Something of my own self was suddenly restored to me, and with it belief in God—belief in Philip! Noel Vaughan must have read my thoughts in my face. He grasped the hands which the fire had spared—they were still fine and white—held them a moment—released them reluctantly.

"My poor child, what torments you must have suffered! Take courage. By this time Philip is probably on his way to you. News of his uncle's death reached us to-day."

"Oh," I cried out, in mingled joy and consternation, "what shall I do?" He shrugged his shoulders.

"Give him such consolation as you can, Iris, for his great expectations have all vanished in thin air. The uncle's fortune was squandered long ago, on various schemes—nothing remains for Philip. However, I have heard of a capital business opening, which I shall offer him when he comes. It may, in some measure, console him for his disappointment."

He walked with me back to the garden, rattling on with extraordinary vivacity—praising Philip, whom, as I knew, he secretly detested, and striving in every way to divert my thoughts from myself. He put his own sorrows under foot that he might soothe mine.

"I shall wait until your marriage, Iris," he said, lightly; "until Philip is established in his new position, and then turn rover for awhile. I have sheep farms in Australia, and a sojourn in the bush has, at least, the charms of novelty to recommend it. Change is good for a man—it rubs off the rust of life."

I looked at him remorsefull

"Noel, I do not think I ever knew you until to-night," I said.

He coloured to his temples, and seemed about to answer; then lifted his hat without another word, and walked away.

One week later Philip came back.

It was a dreary night, with snowflakes whirling by the long windows, and a tumult of waves whitening the bay. My aunt, pale and unnerved, looked on apprehensively, while Marie dressed me in my plainest gown, and, by a few dexterous touches, prepared me for the ordeal.

"You are very dismal, aunt," I said, trying to laugh, "and your mood is infectious. I feel like some prisoner of the Terror, making a toilet for the guillotine."

Presently, we heard carriage wheels at the door.

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"My poor child," groaned my aunt, "shall I go down with you?"

"No," I answered, "I will meet him alone," and I gathered my failing courage, and, with a firm step, descended the staircase.

He was standing before the hall fire drawing off his gloves. The red light played on his tall figure and handsome, fair face. He looked fatigued and out of spirits. As he heard the rustle of my garments, he turned, stared wildly, then reeled back a step.

"Philip!" I said, in alarm—"Philip, it is I!"

At least, he recognised my voice. Doubt became certainty. Perhaps he had tried to prepare himself for this meeting—for the change of which I had warned him. But human nature is weak. His imagination had failed to compass the truth.

"Not—Iris?" he gasped, in a voice that I shall never forget.

"Yes—Iris!" I answered.

"Great Heaven!"

He staggered, and fell like a log to the floor of the hall.

Here was something so eloquent—so decisive—that no appeal from it was possible. In that moment of horror love expired. My whole thought was to save him further trial; so I knelt beside him, as he lay prone and senseless, kissed him once—such a kiss as we give the dead, full of the anguish of final farewell—then rose and stole quietly out. I never saw Philip St. Mark again.

Life went on, as it always goes, whether sorrow rules it or joy. The meadows grew green in Spring and tawny in autumn; the blue bay smiled in sunshine and darkened in storm. I had dropped out of Society—out of my place in the gay world, as completely as though I lay with the coffined dead. In my lost dominion new belles and beauties reigned; I was virtually forgotten.

Time softened my disfiguring scars and smoothed away something of their harshness. My hair grew long, bright, luxuriant again. I still preserved the dazzling arms and hands and the grace of figure, about which my admirers had raved in previous days; but never again would I be known as the beautiful Miss Daintree.

One day I read of Philip's marriage with a rival—one who had once stoutly contested honours with me. I chanced to be sitting in the garden, when Noel approached, and laid the newspaper containing the announcement upon my lap. He was still a constant visitor at the house—his Australian sheep farms were, as yet, unvisited.

"Don't break your heart over this piece of news, Iris," he said.

I looked up into the only eyes that had refused to see any change in my poor face.

"Have no fear," I sighed. "Philip St. Mark has passed completely out of my life."

He leant over my garden chair.

"Iris, I want you to marry me!"

"What! Marred as I am—hideous——"

"Hush! You are the loveliest woman in the whole wide earth!"

"Your folly is inconceivable, Noel. Who but you would go on nursing such delusions, year after year, shutting your eyes upon facts that are plain to the rest of the world—seeking no cure for your madness?"

"Good Heavens! I would not be cured for the universe. Don't trifle. I am desperately in earnest, Iris."

I tried to smile.

"Often I have heard that love is blind, but now I am sure of it!"

"Iris, Iris, give yourself to me. Have you not kept me in despair long enough?"

"Very well," I said. "Since you are so foolish, Noel, and so persistent, take me!"

And I stretched out to him my unmarred hands.

E. W. Parsons.

OUR BACHELOR'S OBSERVATIONS.

Man proposes—and the young lady sends him round to papa to see if he opposes.

A woman never finds out the virtues of her first husband until she marries a second time.

One woman always pays more attention to what another woman has on than to what she says.

An ugly wart is a difficult thing to get off one's hands. An ugly daughter is still more difficult.

A woman in love is more or less foolish, but she never finds it out so long as the man is good to her.

Whenever a girl begins to lecture a young man on financial economy he can safely ask her to name the happy day.

A woman never sees a baby without wanting to run to it and a man never sees one without wanting to run from it.

A girl's features may be stamped on a young man's heart, but it's always her complexion that looms up on his coat-collar.

A man will not admit that there is a taint of insanity in his blood—until his rich uncle dies and leaves all his property to a society for stray animals.

A girl's opinion of a young man before she marries him is very like his mother's opinion of him; after marriage she thinks more as his father thinks.

The first year a man kisses his wife whenever he comes home, the second year he kisses her whenever he goes out; after that he kisses her whenever she makes him.

Call a girl a chick, and she smiles; call a woman a hen, and she howls. Call a young woman a witch, and she is indignant; call her bewitching, and she is charmed. Call a girl a kitten, and she rather likes it; call a woman a cat, and she'll hate you. Queer sex, isn't it?

To remain a woman's ideal, a man must die a bachelor.

Moonlight is accountable for many mistaken matches.

Love in a cottage is all right. The thing is to get the cottage.

Girls like a drooping moustache, especially when it droops their way.

The average woman will forgive her rival anything but her beauty.

In order to tell a woman's age correctly a man must first ascertain it.

Lovers who would avoid quarrels should never stroll in cross roads.

The talk of women is usually about men; even their laugh is "He! he! he!"

Silence gives consent, but most women prefer to employ the word "No" for this purpose.

If you think you are too tall, marry an extravagant woman, and you will soon find yourself short enough.

When a young lady offers to hem a handkerchief for a rich bachelor, she means to sew in order that she may reap.

Some wives worry because they imagine their better half is in love with every doll-faced girl he happens to look at.

It seems a palpable injustice that the woman who is two-faced has no more complexion to worry about than the woman who isn't.

A man with an unmarriageable daughter is very much in the same predicament as a bankrupt. He is willing to put his property into the hands of a receiver.

If it is true that old maids are more numerous than they were seventy-five years ago it may only prove that the girls are more particular than they used to be.

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Fate's Decree.

The Love Story of a Man of the World and a Simple Country Girl.

THE man of the world flecked a speck of dust from his patent-leather boots with a dainty silk handkerchief.

"Of course," said Mrs. Branscombe, "I shall do my best for my sister's child—get her a good husband, and all that; but, you see, Maisie is such a simple, shy sort of girl."

"My dear Mrs. Branscombe," observed the man of the world, "don't do *too* much for her."

Dr. Houghton had a lazy way of making such remarks. The fear of offence never seemed to weigh on him. Exceedingly ambitious, though he would never admit it, his regular, clear-cut features were stamped with the impassiveness to all emotion that marks the successful man of the world.

"You are extremely impertinent!" exclaimed Mrs. Branscombe, without, however, showing any signs of displeasure. "I know what you mean when you warn me not to do too much for her. You like that country flavour Maisie carries about with her. That is characteristic of you—superfastidious, pleasure-exhausted man that you are. It's a novelty—all that unaffected ingenuousness which clings to the poor child. You would call it awkwardness, stupidity, in a sister of your own."

"But——" interrupted the young physician, raising his hand.

"But," went on his lecturer, completely ignoring him, "but you like to amuse yourself with it when you encounter it in a simple, little country girl. Ah, you men are all alike. But Maisie, remember, is a relative of mine, and since Fate has thrown her into my way for the particular purpose of polishing up her rusticity, I mean to do my duty by her—even," she concluded, turning a smiling face and bright, keen eyes upon her victim, "at the risk of making her as frivolous and conventional a person as myself."

Dr. Houghton stroked his moustache reflectively and smiled.

"You know your charms are irresistible," he said.

"You also can be irresistible—when you choose. I should not wonder if you intend being so while I am gone." Mrs. Branscombe looked at him intently.

"While you are gone?"

"Yes. Maisie is to stay here, you know—under the protection of the ancient Miss Mariner. The old governess is excellent so far as she goes, but that's not very far. I am afraid she would be no match for you were you to suddenly take it into your head to make love to my little niece from the country.

"Oh, don't stare!" she continued. "You are quite capable of it. You would experiment with her. It would be a new case for you to study. It would interest the professional soul of the physician while it would exhilarate the palate of the man of the world." She looked at him intently.

"Why do you repeat that? Why do you call me a man of the world? I am a hardworking, impecunious drudge of a doctor. The two terms are far from the same thing."

"Oh, no false modesty! You know you are determined to succeed—to climb very high!" She laughed at his silence. "No, it never pleases a man like you to have his ambition unmasked, of course. Nevertheless, how can one help seeing and understand?"

She stood up, and Houghton took the hint as a sign to go. Mrs. Branscombe continued to smile at him with her keen, practised eyes, then she put out her hand.

"Don't relinquish your purpose, that's all. Climb high, by all means. I like to see such successes. They're a glorious thing. Most people are the servants of circumstance, either unwilling or too lazy to disobey its commands. But you are its master. You are determined that nothing shall prevent you from attaining your ends. That is the reason why I do not wish you to find my little Maisie too interesting."

It was on Houghton's lips to ask this vivacious little lady what she really meant. But he considered it would be a needless subterfuge; he knew quite well what she was hinting at.

"There is no telling what a man may do," he remarked lightly. A moment later he was gone.

Dr. Houghton did not pass Mrs. Branscombe's pretty ivy-clad villa till some days afterwards, when that lady's carriage drove up to the door. The grotesque figure of the old governess, Miss Mariner, alighted, followed by the fair young form of Miss Maisie Langworthy.

The young girl bowed shyly, blushed prettily, hesitated, and finally put out her hand. She had the air of not knowing exactly whether this were quite the right thing to do. But her rosy embarrassment in the setting of her broad, summer hat and her thin, white, muslin dress, pleased the critical sense of this undemonstrative and rather hard-to-please young man in an astonishing degree.

To be sure, he had in a way promised Mrs. Branscombe not to obtrude any attentions upon her inexperienced charge. But he reflected that merely being civil was not paying attentions. At any rate, and however he may have squared the matter with his conscience, he accepted the half-hesitating invitation which Miss Maisie extended to him to enter the villa.

He spent half an hour in Mrs. Branscombe's pleasant drawing-room, and for the rest of the day was somewhat pensive, and his cases absorbed him, perhaps, a shade less than usual.

A week later Dr. Houghton was invited to a garden-party held in the delightful grounds of one of the increasing number of fashionable women who believed that the clever young physician was the only person who thoroughly understood the various peculiarities of their constitutions.

This lady was a widow of uncertain age, the possessor of a very fat bank-book, and a figure that corresponded. To all intents and purposes, however, thanks to sundry visits to beauty doctors, Mrs. Chomley was a young woman. There was a consciousness of this fact in the smile with which she detained the rising celebrity at her side.

On this occasion Dr. Houghton was not such an attentive listener to the lady's chatter as he usually was. Now and

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again his cold, earnest eyes would persist in wandering to a certain little tea-tent. Mrs. Chomley noticed it.

"Leave me this instant, sir," she said, half seriously, "if you want to talk to that simple child over there."

"Must I?" asked Houghton, with gravity.

But the stout widow had already turned her back upon him.

Maisie was standing near a white canvas tent, wherein were grouped a number of young ladies, with haughty, critical eyes, engaged more in entertaining a cluster of slim, limp youths in ultra-fashionable garments than in the strawberries and cream and other dainties which adorned the little round tables. Maisie was entirely ignored by them, as she stood with a certain wistfulness upon her fair, childlike features.

"What brutes women can be to each other," commented Houghton, striding over the lawn.

Maisie brightened up with the most innocent pleasure at sight of him. She put out her hand as though they were quite old friends.

"Well, how do you like all this?" asked the doctor, smiling down at her. Maisie was eight inches shorter than Houghton.

"Oh, it's lovely!" she answered.

"Do you really find it so?"

The girl looked up quickly, and in his downward glance found a complete comprehension of the situation. She blushed slowly, in a pale, delicate fashion, which reminded Houghton of the fascinating accomplishment which superb young women of the world never seem to possess nowadays.

"Of course I am not one of them," Maisie remarked innocently. "They talk of things I don't understand. I don't know the people they know. So—it's natural."

"Natural that you should be left out in the cold?"

She looked a little frightened. He seemed to be accusing these animated, fluent, bright-eyed young ladies.

"Take my arm," he commanded gently; "we'll walk round the fruit garden."

Maisie put her hand obediently on his coat-sleeve.

* * * * *

"I want to have a serious talk with you," observed Mrs. Branscombe to Dr. Houghton, when she returned a fortnight later.

"I know quite well what you're going to say," he rejoined meeting her glance with one in which she read something that made her tighten her lips a little.

"You have not kept your promise."

"I could say that I never made a promise," replied the physician; "but that, after all, would only be literally true."

"I'm glad you're honest, anyway. It's all I can say for you. What has become of your vaunted common-sense, and your prudence? You know very well that you will be making the greatest mistake of your life if you allow this flirtation to go on to its final consummation. Maisie is the best little creature in the world, but she would make you as suitable a life's partner as a dove would an eagle."

Dr. Houghton regarded her coldly and with unmoved face.

"What," she added, exasperated at his silence, "what can you, with your temperament, see in the child, indeed?"

"I don't know," he confessed, after a moment's hesitation.

Mrs. Branscombe shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, and what do you propose to do? I can't allow you to dangle about the girl, giving her a possible interest in you which is not likely to culminate in anything. Maisie is not the sort of woman I care for—as a type: that type of yielding, unassertive woman who stirs no one to enthusiasm. But I will not have her trifled with. Your self-interest and duty bid you do a certain thing."

"I have been telling myself that for three weeks past."

"Then, act upon it at once! Go to Mrs. Chomley to-day and put yourself beyond the possibility of committing any folly."

"Women are astonishing. You propose that I should——"

"Offer yourself without preliminaries—of course not. But begin pursuit in that direction in a way which will leave no room for doubt. You know she would marry you. And, logically, that is the sort of marriage you should make."

Mrs. Branscombe followed her guest as he walked toward the door.

"Shall you go to Mrs. Chomley?" she inquired finally.

He stood for a whole minute, his brows contracted, his eyes fixed intently on the ground.

"Yes!" he said, at last.

* * * * *

"Maisie! My poor, poor child! Run for the doctor, someone! Quick! quick! There's not a moment to lose. There—lay the dear child down gently. My dear Miss Mariner, you are not hurt, are you? How—how did this terrible affair happen?"

But the poor old lady, with a vanished fringe and shaken nerves, was utterly unable to tell a lucid story. From her hysteric phrases, gasped out between sobs, and the short, abrupt answers of the footman, who stood very white and trembling before her with the sleeve of his coat torn, Mrs. Branscombe was able to piece together the story of how the carriage had been overturned and the coachman killed instantly.

"Who shall I go for, ma'am? Dr. Houghton?" cried the voice of one of the servants out of the confusion.

When Dr. Houghton arrived, a quarter of an hour later, Maisie had not yet opened her eyes. It was with white lips, after an agony of suspense in the silent room, that the young physician again raised his head.

"A complicated fracture," he said briefly.

Mrs. Branscombe was led weeping from the room. Besides her grief at her niece's misfortune, she was heartily ashamed of herself. She felt as though vengeance had descended upon her for her disloyalty to the daughter of her sister.

She refused to be comforted, and walked up and down her room, shuddering at every step, at every opening and shutting of the doors. When she could stand the suspense no longer she went downstairs to the drawing-room, into which Maisie's inanimate body had been carried. The door was open, and two or three servants were standing in a little whispering group about it. Dr. Houghton came towards her. The distracted lady laid her hand on his arm. Her throat was dry.

Her agonised eyes tried to read the doctor's face.

"She will be a cripple for life!" he said.

* * * * *

"And when do you intend to be married?'

Mrs. Branscombe asked the question with averted face. Dr. Houghton was standing in her drawing-room, where Maisie was reclining on a couch. Six months had elapsed since the distressing accident.

"As soon as possible," replied the young physician. "Maisie will not be able to stand a severe climate this winter. Her health has been too much shaken. I thought if you would let her be married from your house I could take her at once to the south of France."

Mrs. Branscombe remained silent for a moment.

"How will it suit your profession to go abroad and leave everything?"

"I don't know. But in any case that cannot count now."

"No; that cannot count now," Mrs. Branscombe repeated.

She afterwards confessed that, to her, weddings were always depressing, but that this particular one was the most torturing she had ever witnessed.

"And so," said Mrs. Chomley, who had made the bride a magnificent present and showed the doctor the most animated cordiality, "here is that promising Dr. Houghton with a delicate, crippled girl of a wife on his hands for life! It seems positively tragic! No money upon either side. The poor man has nothing but checks to success in his profession. It seems, my dear, really like the wreck of a brilliant career."

"My dear Mrs. Chomley," remarked Mrs. Branscombe, after a long silence, "I always held that human beings were superior to Fate. I think otherwise lately. I feel the change as the first warning that I am growing old. But what I have been asking myself during the last six months is whether Dr. Houghton was a man of the world, after all?"

H. Muston.

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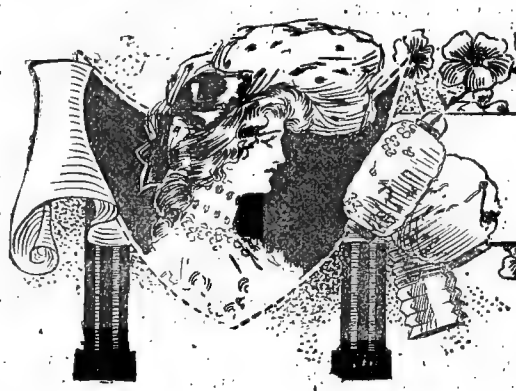

BETWEEN TWO STOOLS.

Relating How a Half-Hearted Lover Fell to the Ground.

It was the last masked ball of the season. Two genteel loungers who had strolled in to look at the costumes now sat in one of the little alcoves that opened upon the balcony, smoking and chatting over their cigars.

"Where are you going for a holiday?" said the one.

"On the Continent, I think. Party of us going; all the club; all save Durand."

"And he?"

Halbert laughed.

"He will not be induced to go very far this summer," he said. "He's done for, evidently."

"What! you don't mean he is in earnest with the dashing Octavie? I fancied he was not so far gone as that."

"I think he cares more for Octavie than he is willing to confess, even to himself. But he is off on a new trail now. There is a lovely wild rose of a girl been visiting friends of his. She is from Haresfield, fifty miles from town. Her father has a superb country residence, and she is an only daughter. He is invited up there for shooting and fishing by her brother. If he goes—farewell, Durand. The wild rose is very fresh and very fair, and her parents know it. They know, too, that Durand is rich as a young Crœsus, and wonderfully susceptible for one of his years and experience. I feel sorry for Octavie."

"Bah!" sneered the other. "You waste your pity. Women of her style do not need it!"

"You do Octavie a wrong," said Halbert. "She is grossly misjudged by most people. She is unconventional in her conduct at times, but she is a good girl, with a heart which I believe is deeply touched just now. I believe she loves Durand passionately."

"I doubt if Octavie is capable of loving!"

"And therein you wrong her. I believe she would make Durand an exemplary wife. Octavie excites my interest and pity. She always has. An orphan—with money, beauty, dash, spirits, wit, no caution, no adviser—she became a social code to herself. She dressed handsomely, but startlingly; she said witty things; her sayings became the property of the club-rooms; she attracted men by her dash and sparkle until she acquired the name of a heartless coquette. But nobody can lay a finger upon one wrong act in the girl's life, and if Durand would marry her, Society would accept her and make the best of it. She is not really dropped, you know—is simply looked on with suspicion. I wish Durand would marry her, but he has not the moral courage. I think he is going off to Haresfield to wean himself from her fascinations. He will come back wearing a wild rose as his talisman of safety. My cigar is smoked out. Let us move on."

They moved on, and did not see the figure of a woman who had sat just outside on the balcony. She had gone out of the heated ballroom to rest and breathe the pure night-air for a moment with her mask off.

She was of fine figure, which was well displayed by her lovely costume. Her rich, bronze hair fell in luxurious freedom over her handsome shoulders, her large brown eyes were full of unshed tears, her beautiful mouth drooped at the corners, her white hands had dropped the mask on her lap, and were clasped convulsively upon her bosom. It was Octavie.

She had heard all the loungers' conversation.

"So he is going to Haresfield," she said; "and to her! We will see!"

She picked up and adjusted her mask, drew her mantle over her shoulders, and glided back among the dancers. She was the observed of all observers—her grace, her charm, her matchless dancing! The masked and unmasked fashionable lookers-on were eager to see her face, but when the hour for unmasking arrived she had gone.

Two weeks later, a tall young fellow, in a straw hat, left his luggage to follow him, and, with a careless glance at the group of loungers about the little station, started across the fields for the hotel, half a mile away on the banks of the river at Haresfield.

He was, perhaps, twenty-eight or twenty-nine years old, clean-shaven, brown-haired, dark-eyed, with a handsome, weak mouth, and an irresistible smile and perfect teeth.

It was Durand.

As he walked leisurely along he heard the clatter of a horse's hoofs. Looking up he saw a handsome, high-spirited black horse, on which was seated a lady, in a perfectly-fitting riding-habit—a lady who reined in her horse when she saw him, and leant forward with a bright smile and bow.

"Octavie! by Jove!" he cried, surprise, pleasure, consternation, all mingled in his face and voice. Then he was over the pasture fence at a bound and standing beside her.

"Are you not glad to see me?" she asked, with one of her bright smiles, as she playfully touched his shoulder with her riding-whip.

"Glad? Why, yes, of course! Always glad to see you, you know, only it's so very sudden and unexpected! Called to see you last week in town, and was told you had gone into the country. Thought it queer you didn't say anything about it last time I saw you."

"Oh, it was very sudden!" smiled Octavie. "I was talking with Mrs. Allen—Mrs. Hugh Allen, you know—about summer resorts, and chanced to mention Haresfield as a nice, quiet place, where one could have plenty of air and exercise, and not be obliged to dress to death. She jumped at it immediately. Said she was here once a few weeks, and she made up a party of six of us in less time than I can tell you, and we came the next day. Have been here a week. I heard you were coming last night."

"Who told you?" queried Durand, as he lifted his hat and ran his slender, white fingers once or twice through his crisp hair.

"Who? Oh, Mr. Errall—Hugh Errall. He was up at the hotel, and said he expected you daily. We were all so surprised and pleased."

"Then you have met Errall?"

"Yes, and his sister came to call upon us to-day! Such a lovely girl—pink-and-white! We all thought her very

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pretty, and she and I struck up quite a friendship. I am invited there to spend the day soon."

A half-shadow crossed the face of Durand. He could not have told why, but he did not like the idea of these two women being friends. It seemed so incongruous! Sylvia Errall and Octavie!

"I am keeping you in the hot sun," she said, "when you want to get to the hotel, I know. Tra la! I will see you later."

She touched her horse, and was gone, with a bright, backward smile and glance, and Durand walked on at a swifter pace.

"So, after all, I am to be under the same roof with Octavie," he mused. "Instead of running away from her, I have run to her, and I'm hanged if I know whether I am glad or sorry. She holds a wonderful fascination for me, but I doubt if it's the sort of feeling a man ought to have for the woman he makes his wife."

Yet, when Errall came up that night, explaining how impossible it was for him to meet the train, and asking Durand to remove his luggage to the beautiful residence, Durand declined.

"Thanks!" he said; "but I will make my headquarters here, old fellow. All my traps for hunting and fishing and riding fill up lots of space, and would be no end of a bother at a private house. I will be with you gladly as much time as you will want me, but will stay here."

He went home with Errall and spent the evening. Sylvia Errall greeted him with that quiet and well-bred reserve that was so habitual to her. How fair she was! Like a blush-rose! And how low her voice! And her eyes!—but he had never seen them fully—the white lids always veiled them.

She sang and played dreamy music to him, and talked to him in her low, sweet voice, and begged him to consider her father's house his house, whenever he was so inclined, as he took his departure.

"What a difference!" he said mentally, as he walked towards the hotel. "I wonder how it would have seemed if she had said: 'Tra la! I will see you later!' when I left? Yet, somehow, Octavie says these things so splendidly! A fellow can't but enjoy them."

Three or four of the party were out on the balcony when Durand came up to the steps.

Mrs. Allen leant down and called to him to come up.

"I am smoking my cigar—I can't!" he answered.

"Shall I come down," said a gay voice, "and keep you from melancholy till you finish it?"

It was Octavie.

"Yes, come," he said, and they walked in the moonlight until all the others had left the balcony. And when he slept that night, it was the bright repartee and ringing laugh of Octavie, not the gentler tones of Sylvia Errall, that haunted his dreams.

But that was Octavie's last hour. Durand rose the next morning with a firm resolve to keep himself master of the situation.

"I must not compromise myself *here*," he said; "it is very different from London. There it was looked on as a flirtation. Here it would be thought to be a betrothal, and I don't want that idea to go out. I can be polite and civil, and all that sort of thing, without compromising myself."

And he was polite and civil and cordial when he was in Octavie's presence, which he managed should not be often. Most of his evenings were spent with Sylvia Errall, listening to her sweet, low voice, in speech and song, her carefully-worded phrases, her mild smile, which never became a laugh, and watching her slow, easy grace of movement, and telling himself she would do honour to his position and wealth were she his wife.

"She never startles—she is never striking," he said; "she is like the moonlight."

One day Octavie came down to spend the day, according to agreement. Hugh Errall and Durand came home from a two days' hunt and found her there, and Durand stayed to lunch.

Octavie never looked better. Striking she was always; her rich colouring, her fine figure, the general effect of the woman, made her that; but she seemed to fascinate and charm the gentle Sylvia with her wit and repartee, instead of shocking her, as Durand half expected.

Hugh was in the best of spirits, and his laugh was always ready if Octavie opened her lips, anticipating a witticism.

Durand, who had been strangely nervous when he first found himself in the presence of the two women, soon grew at ease, and made himself delightfully entertaining.

"I think Miss Somers—or Octavie, as you all call her—is charming," said Sylvia the next day to Durand. "I like her dash and sparkle, and she seems so *genuine*, and so earnest."

Durand, who was easily swayed by the opinions of others, felt his heart thrill. After all, Octavie *was* really charming.

He thought of her as he walked up the river path in the starlight, a few hours later. And as if in answer to his thoughts, he found her sitting alone on the balcony, enveloped in a white shawl.

"I know you do not object to smoking," he said, "so I will sit down here and finish my cigarette. May I?"

"Yes," she said, "and let me help you." She took the cigarette with a graceful gesture and a gay laugh, and held it close beside her lips. "Would I not make a fine profile picture now?" she asked.

Just then a window-blind was opened, and a blaze of light enveloped them. She gave back the cigarette, and then fell to talking lightly, while a thousand tumultuous thoughts surged through Durand's brain.

To the average man of the world a spice of *abandon* about a woman they know to be good is fascinating and attractive, whatever the world may say of it. Durand was compelled to admit to himself that he enjoyed the bright, changing variety of Octavie's society better than he did the unexplainable sameness of Sylvia Errall's demeanour.

It never occurred to him that a woman like Octavie Somers could be moulded into anything a man she loved would want her to be. His heart was not great enough to comprehend that.

One night he sat in the hotel, reading the evening paper. He and Errall had been out all day, and Errall had dined with him, and sat at a little distance, also reading.

Two strangers were carrying on a conversation in the office. Suddenly the attention of Durand was called by their mentioning a familiar name.

"'Didn't I see that dashing Miss Somers in the dining-room to-night?" queried one.

And the reply came: "Yes, she is here, handsomer and faster than ever, I should judge—I saw her smoking on the verandah with a gentleman the other night."

There was a dead silence for a second.

Durand paled behind his newspaper, but did not stir. Then, with a little spring like a young panther, Hugh Errall stood before the last speaker.

"You have lied and defamed a friend of mine," he said, in a low, quiet voice. "Take back what you just now said, or I will knock your teeth down your throat."

The man was a coward, as all men who speak lightly of women are, and fairly quailed in the white heat of Hugh's face.

"I—I beg pardon," he said. "I didn't suppose she was a friend of yours. I only spoke in jest."

"I would advise you not to make use of a lady's name in your jests hereafter," said Errall, as he turned away.

Durand followed him out into the starlight.

"Thank you for what you did, old fellow," he said. "It *was* a lie. Miss Somers held my cigarette in her hand a moment the other night on the verandah, and I suppose that that loafer saw it by chance. He deserves a good thrashing."

They said "Good-night," and Durand went to his room with a strange feeling at his heart.

How white and shaken Errall had been! Could it be that he cared for Octavie—that he loved her? The thought made him restless.

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The story of Errall's defence of her name reached Octavie the next day. It had spread through the hotel, as such news will, like wildfire.

The next day she saw him alone she tried to thank him, but her tears choked her, and she covered her face with her hands. He took them both in his.

"I need no thanks," he said softly. "What man would not defend the woman he loved? I love you, Octavie. Will you be my wife?"

And she wore his diamond engagement-ring that night.

Durand heard a chance reference to the romantic *finale* of the sensation the next day. A sudden agitation seemed to seize him. He grew cold and hot by turns, and was like a man beside himself.

His heart and soul all rallied and cried out against another man's possessing this peerless creature, who had been his, virtually so long.

Ah! he would see her—he would talk to her; he would tell her she must not make this sacrifice, for sacrifice it surely was.

"Octavie is romantic," he said, "and she thinks she must give herself to repay this man for his defence of her. But it must not be. I have been mad, blind, to let it go so far."

It was hours before he could see her alone. Then he drew her aside into an alcove.

"Octavie," he cried, a fire in his dark eyes she had never seen there before—"Octavie, what do I hear? Are you betrothed to Errall? Have you promised to be his wife?"

"Yes," she answered, very softly.

He seized her hand.

"Why did you do it?" he cried. "Did you not *know* I loved you—had loved you for a long time? You are sacrificing yourself to a romantic idea, Octavie, in marrying Errall—it must not be!"

She drew her hands away and looked him straight in the eyes.

"It *must* be," she said. "I am *not* sacrificing myself to any idea; I am going to marry Hugh Errall, because I love him."

"Love him?" he repeated, like one dazed.

"Yes," she said, "with all my heart. No other man has any place in my life—he fills it completely."

He heard her with a sharper pain in his soul than he had ever supposed it possible for him to suffer.

"I had dreamt—I had fancied——" he began, and paused.

"Yes, I know," she said. "*I* had dreamt, too—dreamt that you could make me into anything high and true and noble that you desired; but you did not try, and I began to study you—afterwards to compare you with Hugh Errall, and I found him so much nobler that all my heart has gone to him. I have been a motherless girl, Mr. Durand, all my life—gay, spirited, passionate; but I always knew a loving hand could lead me to any height. I have been praised, admired, flattered, scolded, censured, slandered, and it all has made me reckless. Now I am *loved*, and by that love I mean to grow to all womanly grace and worth!"

"But *I* loved you, Octavie!" he cried, his selfish heart in a wild passion of pain at the loss of her.

"No," she said; "no man loves a woman who waits for *his friend* to defend her name. Good-night."

Two months later, when the party had all gone back to the city, Durand lingered behind.

"A man is a fool who grieves his life away over any woman," he said. "And Sylvia Errall would be a model wife, I doubt not."

So he asked her to accept the vacancy.

"Are you not aware that I am betrothed to my cousin, now in America?" she asked, turning her calm eyes upon him in surprise. "I supposed you knew of it—an engagement of long standing, and known to all my friends. I am sorry this has occurred."

So was Durand.

Reynold Frazer.

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On the Look-Out.

She: "They say that persons of opposite qualities make the happiest marriages." He: "That's why I'm looking for a girl with money."

Might Rely Upon Him.

"Well, old fellow, it's all settled. I am going to be married in two months. You will come to the ceremony, I hope?" "Count upon me. I never desert a friend in misfortune."

She'd See to That.

They were returning home, and the glamour of the elopement had somewhat worn off. "Marry in haste and repent at leisure," said Jack, just the least bit worried. "Oh, don't worry, dear," said she, sweetly; "I'll see that you don't have any leisure."

He Saw His Reflection.

"Mamma," said Jamie, mysteriously, "did I ever have a little brother that fell into the well?" "No," said his mamma. "Why?" "Because when I looked into the well this morning there was a little fellow down there that looked just like me."

A Counter-Question.

"Would you want me," the heiress asked, "if I were penniless?" "Would you want me to want you," the flabby-looking earl replied, "if I had no title?" Then they agreed to lay the matter before her father without further consideration.

A Select Assembly.

Papa: "You were up late last night, daughter." Daughter: "Yes, papa; our fresh-air club met on the verandah." Papa: "Who belongs to your fresh-air club?" Daughter (slowly and somewhat reluctantly): "Well—Jack, and—and—I."

The Difference.

Mr. Twicewed: "It's funny to me that people can ever look upon marriage as a lottery." Miss Youngthing: "How delightful to hear a man speak like that. Now, tell us why you think as you do?" Mr. Twicewed: "Why, in lotteries there are prizes."

It Had Slipped His Memory.

"She seemed infatuated with you, and yet she refused you?" "Yes." "I wonder if your declaration was ardent enough?" "Well, I told her she was the only woman I had ever loved." "You forgot that you were a widower." "By, Jove! that's a fact."

Where It Would Be Felt.

Mother: "Yes, doctor, my daughter is passionately fond of music. It is her life, her soul! You cannot keep her from the keyboard. Do you think it possible for her genius to develop madness, doctor?" Dr. Blunt: "Certainly; but in the neighbours only, my dear madam."

She Knew All About It.

Helen: "Charley Dasherway has been calling on me three months now. Don't you think it's time he proposed?" Clara: "Oh, no; it was nearly six months before he proposed to me."

Almost Related.

Miss Harcashhe: "Did you say you were nearly related to the Ponsomby family?" Miss Millions: "Oh, yes; my sister once accepted Lord Ponsomby's brother's youngest son—but the match fell through."

Disliked It.

Miss Clara: "Don't refuse in that awkward way, pet. Why don't you kiss the gentleman?" Little Pet (apologetically): "Please 'scuse me, Mr. Nicefello. I'm not so fond of tissing gentlemen as Sister Clara is."

He Had Personal Proof.

Young Wife: "Yes, father always gives expensive things when he makes presents." Husband: "So I discovered when he gave you away." And then he went into the library to draw a cheque for the monthly millinery bill.

Kissing by Deputy.

"Where is my wife, Miss Lowe?" he asked of the new governess. "She has just gone upstairs, sir." "Well, will you kindly give her this kiss for me? I've got a train to catch, and haven't time to take it to her myself."

He Wished to be That One.

She: "Well, if I can't live on my income, and you can't live on yours, where would be the advantage in our marrying?" He (thoughtfully): "Well, by putting our incomes together one of us would be able to live, at any rate."

Where the Wonder Is.

"Do you think there is anything remarkable in love at first sight?" asked the romantic youth. "Not at all," answered the cynic. "It's when people have been courting each other for four or five years that it becomes remarkable."

Ambiguous Sympathy.

Ethel (to her *fiancé*): "What do you think, dear? Jack Oliver proposed to me last night. I suppose he didn't know of our engagement." Her Fiancé: "Is that so—what did you tell him?" Ethel: "I told him I was sorry I was engaged to you."

A Rough Guess.

Golding (who has given his consent): "I hope, young man, that you know the value of the prize you will get in my daughter?" Young Man: "Well—er—no, sir; I don't know the exact value, but as near as I can find out it's in the neighbourhood of £50,000."

How It Came About.

He: "And so you're really going to marry that professor? You, the heroine of a thousand engagements! How did you ever come to accept him?" His cousin (a Girton girl): "Why, you see, he proposed in Greek, and when I refused him I got mixed in my negatives and accepted him, and now I'm too proud to acknowledge my blunder."

He Was Annoyed.

Young Wife: "There's a gentleman in the library, dear, who wants to see you." Young Husband: "Do you know who it is?" Young Wife: "You must forgive me, dear, but that cough of yours has worried me so of late, and you take such poor care of your health, and—and, oh, if I were to lose you, my darling?" Bursts into tears. Young Husband: "There, there, dear! Your fondness for me has inspired foolish and unnecessary fears. I'm all right; you mustn't be alarmed. But I'll see the physician, of course, just to satisfy you. Is it Dr. Pellett?" Young Wife: "No, it is not a doctor; it's a—a life insurance agent!"

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WORTH A GUINEA A BOX.

BEECHAM'S PILLS

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Conducted by CYNTHIA.

[In this page are answered any letters from readers dealing with affairs of the heart, tangles in domestic life, or points of etiquette. All communications must be addressed to Miss Cynthia Hamilton, c/o the Editor of SHORT STORIES.*]*

Three and a Theatre.

"M. H." is engaged to Percy. Staying in the same house as "M. H."—a boarding-house—is Frank, who has been paying some attention to "M. H." The other day Frank suggested that "M. H." should accompany him to the theatre. Of course "M. H." instantly replied: "Oh, thank you, but I usually go to the theatre with my *fiancé*." Instead of instantly collapsing, the pressing Frank said: "How very nice. But supposing he comes with us, too? I will get seats for the three." "M. H." wants to know how such a strange invitation should be met.

* * * * *

Very simply, "M. H." As the young man seems inclined to invite an unlimited number of people to the theatre, perhaps he would not mind taking yet another, making the party four. This should be your mother, or aunt, or, if that seems too cruel, say, a girl cousin or friend. There would then be four of you, each provided with a partner. Nobody need then be jealous, and the attentive Frank would be able to turn his pressure in another direction.

Methods of Proposing.

WHAT a funny idea of yours, "J. D.," that "there is a formal ceremony in proposing to a young lady, just as there is in a wedding, but not so sacred." I never heard it put that way, but as evidently you seriously seem to believe it, perhaps there are others in the same position.

* * * * *

Of course, there is no ceremony in proposing whatever. No two people have sealed the bonds of love in the same way, as you will easily find out by asking any married man or woman or your acquaintance. After a certain period of courtship, two young people realise that they are all-in-all to each other. One day, when the man has thought matters seriously over, and has decided that he is financially able to marry, he "pops the question." It doesn't matter how he does it. He may do it by a hint, or by a chance word. It is a matter of temperament whether a man makes a flowing speech, or whether he just mutters two or three words. Propose in whatever way is natural to you. Don't believe any more in that ceremony idea.

The Modest Marriage.

"ROBERT." No properly-minded girl, engaged to a young man, would expect that in their little home she should enjoy all the good things she has been accustomed to at her father's home. What if all your knives and forks are not silver, and your ornaments not antiques, and your pictures not old masters? You are young, and no doubt the girl's father himself was in no better position when he was first married. Don't be afraid that your sweetheart will be ashamed of the home you can offer her. If she is as nice a girl as you say, she will be prepared to rough it, and to rise in the world with you. Besides, she is engaged to you, not to furniture and china.

A Strange "Gentleman."

"WHAT should I do?" asks "MARY." "A gentleman I meet in the street—whom I don't know—always winks at me as he passes. I should like your advice."

* * * * *

This is the first time, "MARY," I have heard of a *gentleman* who winks at strange girls in the street. He must be a new breed which I have not read of in my natural history. Take no notice of him at all, and if he should continue to embarrass you, tell your brother or father of it, and arrange that the rude man shall be taught a lesson in good behaviour. I take it, of course, that you have given him no encouragement, and that you write in an earnest manner.

A Paternal Problem.

I DO not often receive a request for advice from a stern father, but "PATER" writes to me this week: "I have been so struck with the sound commonsense and knowledge of the world shown by your answers, that I want to place the following problem before you. I am a man of private means, and shall leave my daughter a nice little income on my death. Now, I wish her to marry some young man who will not merely live on her means, but will himself be in a good position. Instead of this, my daughter is receiving attentions from a penniless young fellow, who is absolutely idle, and good for nothing. I believe he is not really in love with her, but only seeks her money, so as to save himself the necessity of working.

"Whenever I mention him to her she says, 'Father, he loves me, and I love him. We cannot part.' Now, what can I do in the matter? I do not wish to wreck my daughter's happiness, but I feel that this young man is no proper match for her."

* * * * *

As "PATER" is well-to-do, perhaps he will not mind putting himself to a little expense to rid his daughter of her objectionable lover. If "PATER" really believes that young man to be worthless, and not truly in love with his daughter, he should certainly take active steps to terminate the marriage. As harshness might defeat this object, I recommend him to take his daughter away for some time—abroad, for choice—where she will have every opportunity of meeting other people, and forgetting her present suitor. Or else "PATER" has in view a certain young man who would really suit his daughter. Such a young man might act as a very good foil to the other, and it would be well worth "PATER'S" while to try to find him. As a last resource, "PATER" should forbid the young man to visit the house, or to see his daughter. This may seem hard, but it often saves two young lives from unhappiness, if based on proper judgment.

In Defence of Old Maids.

"EDNA" is the eldest of a family of six, and is nearly thirty. She is the one old maid in the family, and is despairing of ever meeting a man to marry. She is plainer than her sisters, who have, accordingly, always received the best attentions. She is very kind-hearted.

* * * * *

Why be afraid of being an old maid? It is growing quite fashionable nowadays. Many women realise that marriage is not the best thing for everybody, and there must be certain natures which can lead happier lives freed from the cares of a household. I always think it is the right sort of girl who remains an old maid. She is well fitted to remain unmarried, as a general rule. And what a good time she often has, if she is on visiting terms with her brothers and sisters. Don't be alarmed at being left "on the shelf." Queen Elizabeth, Florence Nightingale, and some of the greatest women in history were spinsters, so why not yourself?

Cynthia

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MISCELLANEOUS ADVERTISEMENTS.

Will be inserted in this column at the rate of 6d. per line of 8 words or part thereof. All advertisements should be addressed to Advertisement Manager, "Short Stories," 17 Henrietta Street, London, W.C., 11 days prior to date of appearance.

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Gent's magnificent 18-carat gold-cased Chronograph **Stop Watch**; jewelled movement; perfect timekeeper; 10 years' written warranty; also fashionable **Curb** (pocket to pocket) **Double Albert**, same quality (stamped and guaranteed), with handsome seal attached; three together sacrifice for 10/6. Approval before payment.
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Fashionable Curb Chain Padlock **Bracelet**, 18-carat rolled gold (stamped), in handsome case, 6/6; another, heavier quality, large and thick links (stamped); sacrifice, 8/6; approval before payment.
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524 High Road, Chiswick, London, W.

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Old Artificial Teeth Bought.—Call or forward by post; full value per return, or offer made.—Messrs. O. Browning, Manufacturing Dentists, 133 Oxford Street, London. (Established 100 years.)

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